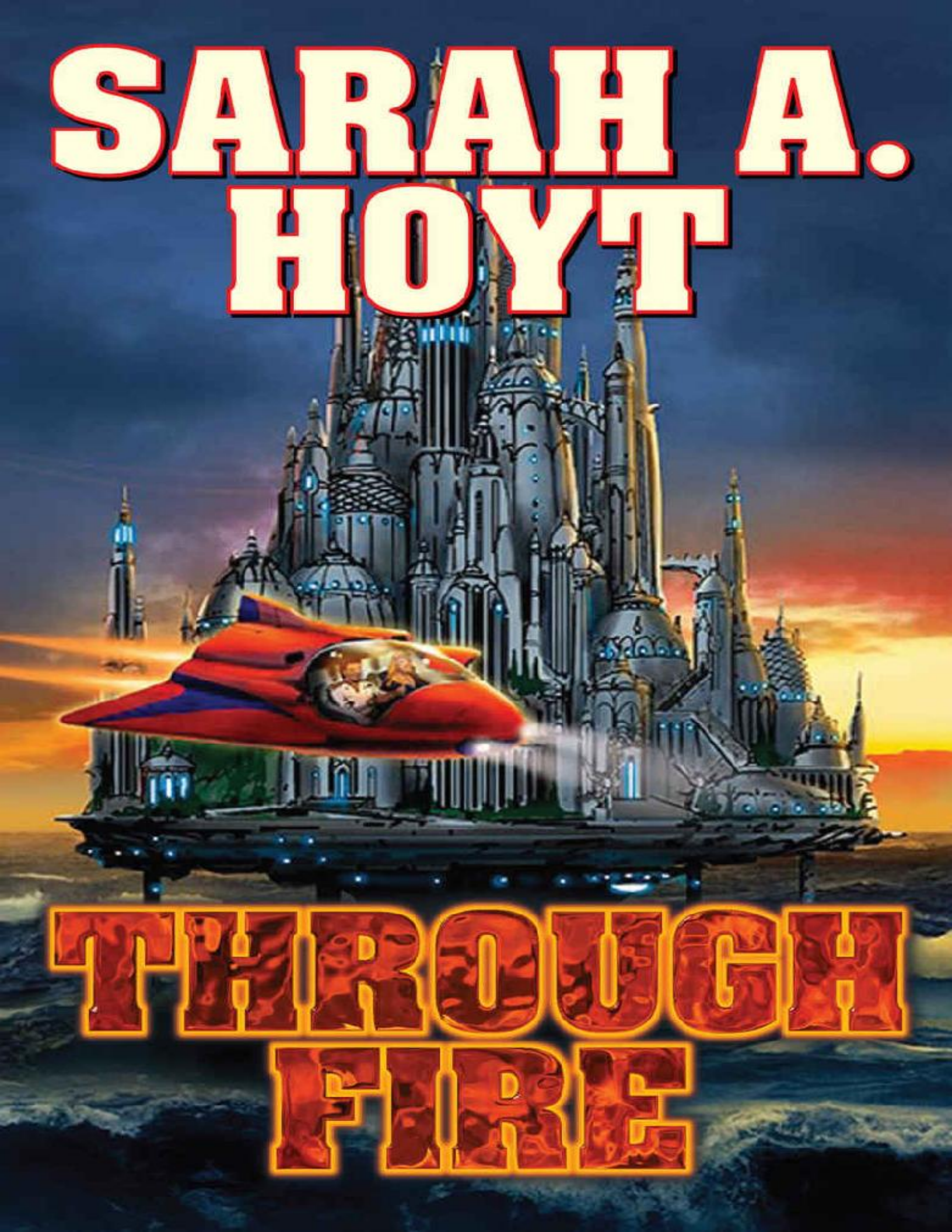
SARAH A.
HOYT
THROUGH
FIRE

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THROUGH FIRE

SARAH A. HOYT

Baen Books

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Through Fire

Sarah A. Hoyt

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In Memoriam:
Alan L. Lickiss 1962–2014
Matthew Benjamin Landry 1975–2015
Until we meet again.

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LIBERTE

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When Worlds Collide

A SPACESHIP MECHANIC HAS NO PLACE IN A FAIRY TALE, NOT EVEN WHEN SHE'S dressed in a flowing gown and being courted by one of Earth's most powerful men.

I was designed to be able to repair spaceships and to navigate them home safely. I had calluses on my hands from working with heavy tools on delicate machinery. I was strong enough to kill a grown man with a casual blow. And I had a burner strapped to my ankle under my ball-gown.

The man courting me was a scoundrel, a dictator, and likely a murderer. And we were dancing at a spun-sugar palace, atop a fairy-tale seacity. It was his ballroom, his palace and his seacity. He was my only protector on Earth and my host for the last six months. He wanted me. He had been gentle and caring and solicitous of me. I wanted to escape the happy-ever-after fairy-tale ending.

You should be careful what you wish for.

It was a relief when the palace exploded.

We'd been dancing, Simon and I and more than a hundred other couples, twirling on the black polished dimatough floor of his ballroom while the light of massive chandeliers shone from softly glistening white walls.

It used to be the palace of the Good Man of Liberte seacity. Simon was a Good Man, one of fifty hereditary rulers who, between them, split the vastness and wealth of the Earth. Or at least he had been.

The people gathered in the ballroom sported outfits that seemed to be spun of butterfly wings, and that defied the shape of the human body. Other clothing harked back to the fantastical age of empires almost seven hundred years before—long, sweeping dresses and molding outfits in materials that were better than velvet and silk. My own dress was made of a form of ceramic. It felt like satin to the touch, but its dull black heft shone with

pinpoints of light, as if stars had got caught in its depths. Simon had picked it for me and had it carried in by proud couturiers that very morning, its fine, slippery folds wrapped in silk and beribboned, like a fantastic gift.

Liberte seacity had been formed by a bankers' consortium at the close of the twenty-first century, and like the other seacities back then it was created as a refuge from high taxes and excessive government regulation and oversight. Unlike other seacities, it had never been designed to host any industry, any useful output. Instead, it owned other seacities—Shangri-la, Xanadu and, later, after the Fish War, several European territories—where the workday business took place. Liberte itself had been designed as a resort for those at the pinnacle of that long-vanished world. Idyllic beaches climbed up through terraces with carefully landscaped gardens, like a dream of an Arcadia that never was. Its inevitable utilitarian levels—where valets and maids, law enforcers and garbage collectors lived—were hidden, out of sight, by ceilings that formed the ground of the next level.

Approaching Liberte from the air, as I'd first done, one saw it only as a sort of white and green confection, something like an idealized wedding cake.

The palace of the Good Man topped the cake: white and surrounded by columns and terraces, built with an airy grace that would have been impossible without poured dimatough and sculpted ceramite. It might have fitted a previous age's dream of a fairy palace, an immortal fantasy.

The ballroom sat at the very top of it all, and its walls alternated with vast panels of transparent dimatough, through which—as the night fell—you could watch the sea, glistening in every direction, all around us, blue and still like a perfect mirror.

As we twirled to a tune called "Liberte" and composed for this ball, I faltered. I looked through the window at the troop transports moored in that smooth sea. I'd known they were there: a vast, dark menace that encircled us, the much larger forces massed against Simon and the other rebels against the regime of the Good Men that had held the Earth for three hundred years. Simon and the other rebels were, at least in theory, trying to free their particular portions of the world. Even if I had my doubts about Simon's sincerity.

"Why are you looking out the window?" asked Simon St. Cyr, *ci-devant* Good Man of Liberte seacity, who, by a stroke of the pen, had made himself "Protector of the People and Head of the Glorious Revolution."

He was slightly shorter than I, had brown hair and brown eyes and looked unremarkable. Which I'd come to believe was protective coloration to stop people wondering what he might be plotting. He had been created as the clone of a man once designed as a superspy, and for the last ten years he'd lived a life where his only safety came from acting foolish and shallow. Sometimes I wondered if he knew where the act started. And where it stopped.

His hand rested on my waist, long fingers transmitting an impression of controlled strength through the pliable fabric.

"I'm looking at those troop carriers," I said, concentrating on the music and the movement of my feet. It didn't take that much effort, because I too had been created, not born in the normal way, and I'd been designed for speed and agility and grace.

Simon looked over my shoulder at the transports, and made a face, half dismissal and half amusement. "Oh, that," he said and shrugged a little, contriving to give the impression that the glistening transports, each of them able to carry more than a thousand armed men, were a negligible detail like a speck of dust on the floor of his polished ballroom. "Don't worry, *ma petite*."

I'd not yet decided if Simon's habit of larding his speech with archaic French words annoyed me or amused me, but calling me "little" pushed it, since I was at least two inches taller than him. Impatience colored my tone, as I said, "But shouldn't *you* be worried? These people depend on you for their safety." And this was true. As far as there was an authority in the seacity, it was Simon, whose predecessors had commanded it from time immemorial, and who had the loyalty of all troops and functionaries. At least in theory. Whether he called himself Good Man or Protector, he reigned here.

He made a sound, not quite a chuckle at the back of his throat. "And they're perfectly safe," he said. "Listen, those troop carriers aren't going to do anything, *pour cause*."

"And the cause is?"

"Oh, *ma petite*. The cause is I have it on good authority they're mostly empty. The Usaian Revolution over in Olympus and Sea York and their territories is keeping the Good Men fully busy, and costing them more men than they can recruit, unless they start creating people in vats, as they did at

the end of the twenty-first century. Until they do that, though, the Usaians are giving them more trouble than they can handle. And since people created in vats still have to grow up, I'd say we have a good fifteen years' respite." He looked at me, and his brown eyes danced with unmitigated amusement, like an adult laughing at the preoccupations of a toddler. His body moved seamlessly with the music, even as he smiled at me. "Listen, Zen. I wouldn't have declared the revolution if I hadn't thought there were next to no chances of reprisal by the *ancien regime*, the global might of what used to be the Good Men consortium. I'm a revolutionary, yes, *m'amie*, but I'm not stupid."

I gave him a dubious look, but something I'd decided shortly after arriving on Earth was that Simon was not in fact stupid. Truth be told, he might be too smart for his own good. He was certainly very good at keeping Simon safe and sound and at knowing the best means of doing so. And he was completely amoral about it too.

The pressure of his hand on my waist increased fractionally. I let him lead me, as I cast one last glance at the transports on the bronze-gilded sea, bobbing slightly in the current. They'd been there for twenty-four hours, and they'd done nothing. Simon had to be right. He had to. Those transports were air-and-surface. Had they been filled with troops enough to overwhelm the seacity defenses, they'd have flown in, landed and taken over, long ago. They were for show. For intimidation. They weren't real. I could, at least, trust Simon to see what was a threat to him and what wasn't.

We danced.

Though I came from a very different culture, born and raised as I'd been in a small and secret *lost* colony of Earth, as a guest of the Good Man —oh, pardon me, the Protector—I'd been taught to dance to anything that might be played at the ball. This was a waltz, an ancient dance that had once been scandalous. We segued from it to the glide, a modern dance that was considered very difficult. Our bodies moved in unison as though we'd practiced together. Which we hadn't. We'd simply been created to be good at most things physical. Both of us were made, not conceived, assembled protein by protein in a lab, and were both faster and more coordinated than normal people.

The dance floor filled to repletion with twirling people, as the sun sank completely into the sea. In the darkness that followed, the troop transports became mere black dots on the inky water.

We took a break for drinks and food, then returned to the dance floor. It was in the middle of this dance when Simon said, “Zen, listen, I need to ask you a very important question.”

My whole body tensed, and I stopped, trying to think of a gentle way of refusing his hand in marriage. I owed him so much, and though I wouldn’t marry for such a reason, I also didn’t know what form his displeasure might take if I said no. He was the sole ruler of a vast territory. If he got angry, he might exact terrible vengeance. Besides, my foster parents had raised me to always pay my debts. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye, not sure how to refuse him without hurting him, and, more importantly, without inviting his wrath. I couldn’t accept him. I’d been married once. I didn’t love Simon unreservedly, as one should love one’s husband.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said.

And then an explosion rocked us.

At first, I wasn’t sure it hadn’t been part of the music, then the concussion hit, making the floor shake and the entire airy palace tremble and resonate, like a platter that had been struck a blow with a hard object. From somewhere below came an orange reflection, a bloom of light, immediately extinguished.

Simon stopped completely, his hands on my waist, his brow wrinkling and said, *“Merde!”*

I cast a look at the sea, but it remained unlit and the darker points of the transports still bobbed on the water.

Another explosion, this one more deafening. Above us, a glistening crystal chandelier swayed. Bits of crystal rained down on couples who lurched to a stop. The orchestra struck another tune but it petered out as only half the members even started playing. People screamed.

A third explosion hit. The palace rocked and Simon wrapped an arm around me and leapt, carrying me with him to the edge of the ballroom, up against the wall. I could smell him. Sweat from our exertions on the dance floor had been joined by something sharper that spoke of fear.

He lay on top of me but not crushing me, his body forming a defensive cover over mine, blocking my view, blocking my movement.

“Simon,” I said, half-protest, half-entreaty. I twisted to get the burner from my ankle, but he had already grabbed it. He pointed it over my head at

the ballroom's main door. "It's not the armies of the Good Men," he said.

"No," I said. I didn't say *damn it, give me back my burner* because he was firing it at someone, and I couldn't really fire with his bulk on top of me. I had no idea why he was protecting me this way. I'd never needed protection. I tried to look around his shoulder, but he put his arm across to hold me in place.

I wasn't sure if I could knock Simon out. Probably, by sheer force alone. That and I knew he wasn't plate-armored. But he was as fast as I was, and he might stop my attack midway through. Worse, attacking him would distract him from defending himself and, I suppose, me as well. And knocking him out would leave him vulnerable to attackers. "Damn it," I said. "Why weren't you armed?"

He didn't answer. He was breathing very fast, and he now stank of fear.

"Simon," I said, "let me go. I can fight."

"No," he said. His voice hoarse. "It's a mob. They'll kill you, or worse. It's my fight."

A fourth explosion, and then, from outside the ballroom, echoing like it had started somewhere beneath us, came a song. Loud, and inharmonious, it seemed full of threats I only half understood, because it was in the local patois, formed when the city itself had been founded: a mix of archaic French, archaic English, some Spanish words, and a lot of Glaish overlay. Something about setting fire to the world and enjoying the flames. Something about the blood of tyrants.

I felt Simon shake. I won't say he trembled with fear. It was more like shock, or surprise. *"Merde,"* he said again. Then in a louder voice, "Alexis. Alexis! Alexis, for the love of God, get her out of here."

I'd just managed to wriggle upward, to look over Simon's shoulder. I had no idea who Alexis was, and I'd be damned if I was going to be got out of anywhere. The ballroom was a mess, and I got the impression of violence and blood. The air smelled of burner and flame.

Someone bulky and dark, a stranger, crawled up close to us. He loomed close to us in the darkness, his body a suggestion of the white satin and golden braid constituting the uniform of Simon's personal guard, and said, "I called my men."

“Too late. Get her the hell out of here,” Simon said and rolled off me. The stranger reached for me.

“No,” I said sitting up, pulling my hair back from my face. “Simon, give me my burner back.” I had never needed, would never need some person—much less two persons—who were wholly unrelated to me, to take control. I was the one who should take control and save other people. My foster parents had taught me early on that my gifts should be used for the good of others. There were people in danger. I should protect them.

“Go. I can’t fight while you’re in danger. Go,” Simon said. “Alexis, take her.”

He pushed me upward, and before I could resist, Alexis grabbed me around the waist. He was a large, muscular man. There was no hesitation, no pause. He nodded to Simon and loped along, dragging me with him, even as I scrabbled to free myself and protested, “No, you don’t understand. I’d rather fight. I can fight. I’m stronger than—”

“Can’t do anything,” he said. “Can’t fight a mob.” He looked around. “Even my men can’t.”

I wanted to say he was wrong but then I realized I didn’t even know where the threat was coming from or against whom to retaliate and the damn man was pulling me along too fast to let me get my footing, much less get my bearings.

I ground my teeth, tried ineffectually to stop. “Give me a burner.”

But he just pulled me along amid crowds of fighting people. Burners shot this way and that. Alexis seemed to have the supernatural ability to be where no one was, cutting through the crowd, very fast, avoiding the turmoil, ducking before a burner ray flashed through the air where we’d just been. Someone bumped me. Friend or foe, I didn’t know, and regretted only not having the time to steal their burner.

I could no longer see Simon in the crowd. I smelled blood and fire. I stopped resisting Alexis’s pull. Impossible to fight when I didn’t know whom to fight. I might be able to shoot better than most people, but not when friend and foe rolled over, screaming and fighting. And as for hitting someone, I didn’t have time to identify the people I bumped into, much less to fight all of them. So many people. Fighting all around.

The situation was out of control and I hated being out of control.

Another two explosions below, getting closer. The nearest dimatough pane cracked, top to bottom. They weren't supposed to crack. The crystal chandelier fell, bits of crystal flying in all directions.

Alexis said, "Run," and grabbed my hand and took off. I ran. Nothing else I could do in this. There was nothing to be gained in dying alongside those being killed.

Dead women can't fight, I thought. *First, stay alive, then fight.*

Alexis ran into the melee, fast, his arm an iron band around my waist. People careened into me and shot at us. No shot landed. No blow either, beyond the feeling of being bruised and scraped.

He dragged me through what seemed to be a concealed door, down a couple of staircases, and onto a dark terrace by the seaside, in the middle of Simon's gardens.

"Come on," Alexis said, sounding desperate. He pulled at me. "Trust the Good—Trust the Protector. He says I should keep you safe. He knows what he's doing, if we leave his hand free." As he spoke, explosions sounded, coming ever closer. I could hear the barbarous song from the ballroom, faint, like a haunting echo, but drawing near. It seemed to me the sounds of fighting were more muted, which, considering the circumstances, was not a good thing.

"But can Simon defend himself in this? And what about everyone else?" He was a dictator. He might be a murderer. But he had been kind to me. He might have loved me.

"We were taken by surprise," he said. He panted, and it was good to know our race had rendered him out of breath. "I don't know who our attackers are. We have to escape and reconnoiter. If I could fight effectively, I'd fight. The Protector will take care of himself." He pulled me down a dark path on the palace grounds and clattered down a set of staircases. His hand was too warm, rough, holding me as though it were the most important thing in the world that he take me along. "We'll leave the Good Man a free hand. He knows what he's doing. We'll live to fight another day."

We ran across an expanse of lawn and down a brick path and up to a terrace where a row of flyers were parked. Simon's official fleet for his servants, I thought, since the vehicles all looked alike.

Alexis threw me into the passenger seat, got into the driver's side, closed the doors from the control panel. We took off almost vertically.

At once an explosion rocked us, then another.

Alexis said, "*Merde.*" It was a popular word.

"There's more than the mob in the palace. Whoever these people are, they're organized enough to control the skies. We can't fly away." He brought the flyer down, almost straight down, but into a grove of trees, well away from the palace. I was impressed. It took training to fly like that. "We won't be allowed to escape by air. At least…not this easily. And whatever is going on is much bigger than the palace."

I leaned back on the seat, exhausted, feeling like I should go back and fight, but knowing it was quixotic and not very sane. There was only one of me, even if I felt I should be an army. I couldn't believe how fast the ball had degenerated into a scene of death and mayhem. And I was starting to think even accepting Simon's proposal would have been better than this. "Those people who came in. The intruders. Were they carrying heads on poles?" I asked.

"Yes," Alexis said.

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To Walk the Night

"That's—" I took a deep breath. I'd seen images like that from the Turmoils, three hundred years ago. But it was three hundred years ago. Surely it couldn't happen now. We were more civilized, even on Earth, weren't we? "Why would anyone do that?"

"Intimidation," Alexis said. He looked at me, as though trying to figure out just what I'd be prepared to accept. "They're hoping that by being as barbaric as possible, they can get us to surrender before we think of fighting back." He opened his side of the flyer and said, "Come, they might trace this. We must continue on foot, and fast."

I got out and found him there, waiting, reaching for my hand. "I know the way," he said. "At least the way to get away from this."

I stopped. My hands grabbed at the stuff of my dress. "But we must fight back. They can't be allowed—"

"We will," he said. "Or at least I will as soon as I know what's happening. You, on the other hand, aren't part of this and I promised the Good Man to keep you safe."

"It's nonsense," I said. "I'm stronger than you. I'm faster. I'm probably faster and stronger than Simon." I saw his face cloud but couldn't quite read the expression. "I'm supposed to protect others." The last came out as a wail and even I couldn't have known what I meant by it, except that since I remembered my foster parents had told me I should use my extraordinary strength and agility to protect others, rather than hurt them. They'd never told me what to do, I realized, when doing one required the other. They'd left me to navigate those waters on my own.

He frowned at me. Then unceremoniously grabbed my forearm, pulled me along. "You're not stronger than all the people at once. You're not stronger than a mob."

He picked an odd path through the extensive gardens of the palace. I could feel roots and rocks under my feet. The ballroom slippers so perfect for dancing were not at all helpful in broken terrain. But I could hear sounds of people. Not peaceful sounds: shouting and screaming and occasional snatches of running and barbaric song; most definitely not peaceful sounds. If what my enhanced hearing could pick up was right, then the avenues of the garden, those paths that would be easier to walk, were full of the same people who had invaded the ballroom.

Alexis was doing a good job of keeping us away from them, given that he didn't have my abilities. He steered us down slippery lawns and amid tree groves. We didn't want to fight, and he was wearing the white, gold-braid bedecked uniform of Simon's personal guard. I was not only wearing a conspicuous ball gown, but my holo-image had been all over local casts, as the Patrician's special guest.

"You don't understand," I said. "I can fight. We don't have to run away. I'm not…a normal human."

There was a sound suspiciously like a chuckle, as he took a sharp turn at a cypress grove. It was hard to be sure of the song, as there was a whistling wind blowing from the sea and it carried with it the faint echo of revolutionary lyrics. His next words were clear, though. "I know," he said.

The words took my own breath away for a moment. The implications of them made me a little dizzy. "You know?" I asked, my voice sounding like I felt.

He looked back and he was not smiling, which was good and might have saved his life. "The Good Man told me," he said. "Come on. If you're going to start screaming at me, I'd like to get further away from the palace first."

"I don't want to scream," I said, which was true. What I wanted was to understand.

My origins weren't so much a secret as they'd be unbelievable to ninety percent of the people on Earth old enough to understand them.

My ancestors, or at least the ancestors of the people who'd founded Eden, the tiny and secretive colony of my birth, had left Earth three hundred years ago.

They'd been bioimproved people created to serve the creatures who called themselves the biolords, but whom Earth history called Mules. The

name came from their being all male and infertile with human females, thus designed so they couldn’t father a race that would supersede natural humanity.

They’d been created not as rulers but as servants: efficient, all-capable servants who would help rulers administer the massive bureaucracies of the twenty-first century.

They’d taken over. For over a hundred years, they’d ruled as lords of all. And, raised as slaves, insufficiently attached to the human race, their rule had been ruthless and implacable. When the revolt came, which they’d seen coming, about half of them had gathered all they could of their bioimproved servants and taken them away from the Earth, away from the massacres of the bioimproved by the normal, and to space in a ship called the *Je Reviens*.

No one, not even in Eden, knew what had happened between the Mules and their servants abroad the *Je Reviens*. All we knew was that after less than a year of travel, it had been decided that the less-bioimproved people, the servants of the biolords, those who were still capable of reproducing with normal humanity and who were still more human than not, should be left in a hollowed-out asteroid, to found their own colony.

The separation had been achieved with such haste that the colony had not been provided with its own means to collect energy. Instead, it had to send raiders to Earth orbit to collect pods from the powertrees, the biological solar collectors seeded by the Mules in the days of their rule.

Those secretive collections were made in darkships. Dark, so as not to be noticeable against the massive, black trunks of the powertrees. The ships were also, even in comparison to transport flyers on Earth and on Eden, nearly blind and certainly stupid. Instead of improving them and risking their falling in enemy hands with all their information, Eden bioimproved their pilots and navigators, for agility and vision, and sense of direction and memory. I’d been the navigator and mechanic of such a ship for six years, half of a team with my late husband.

If we were disabled or captured, pilot and navigator were to commit suicide rather than let Earth know for sure we existed or where Eden was. I shied away from that thought and thought instead that the system had worked, that this was why darkship thieves were as much of a myth on Earth as elves or mermaids.

“You know I’m a darkship thief?” I asked.

He actually stopped. He’d been walking ahead, regardless of my attempts to talk. “I know you’re like the Patrician,” he said. “One of the Mules. I know you’re as close as possible to a female clone of Jarl Ingemar.”

And then I almost screamed. Jarl Ingemar was arguably the best of the Mules. Or possibly the worst, depending on whom you asked. His rule certainly had been more intrusive than others. You see, he was well-intentioned and brilliant. The powertrees, a lot of the bioimprovements to other humans, more innovations than could be listed were counted to his credit.

If you could imagine Leonardo da Vinci created and raised in a wholly artificial environment and encouraged to think it was his lot to improve not just humanity’s living conditions but humanity itself, you’d be pretty close to Jarl Ingemar.

He’d been the mind behind the conception and creation of the *Je Reviens*. He’d also been one of the two Mules who had chosen to stay behind with the almost normal servants of the Mules, to assist in the founding of Eden. And who, little by little, had encouraged people to forget he still lived, as he walled himself up in a fortress of solitude and isolation.

Perhaps it was to combat this that his best friend, and the other Mule left behind, Bartolomeu Dias, had conceived the scheme of trying to create female and male clones of themselves. Perhaps the scheme had been darker and designed to give the long-lived but not immortal Mules a chance at living forever.

Just before Jarl’s death, they’d created me and what I must for lack of a better word call my brother, Kit. All that I could forgive. I wasn’t sure I could forgive that they’d called me Zenobia, which means spirit of Zeus. Nor that I’d been given to a human couple to raise, a couple who’d always seemed bewildered by me. Bartolomeu Dias, even aged, might have made a better foster parent.

None of this, though, explained why Simon would have told this man that I was made from Jarl’s genes, assembled in a lab by a complex process that defeated the ability to recombine Mule DNA and make female Mules.

If few people on Earth would be able to believe I was a darkship thief, anyone who did believe I was Jarl’s clone was likely to try to kill me.

“He…Why?”

“He trusted me. Trusts me. With what he is, too, with being descended…no, created from the Mules who were left behind. He told me that the same Mule has been succeeding himself as the ruler of Liberte for centuries, having his brain transplanted to that of his putative son, so he could inherit from himself.”

“Why did he tell you? When?”

“Oh, years ago, when he hired me as head of his security,” Alexis said. “There were reasons. In the way I became his head of security, I mean. I can’t explain now. We need to get as far away from the palace as we can.”

My tongue felt like cork in my mouth. I realized I had been gasping through an open mouth, and closed it with a snap, and swallowed. “You don’t care?”

“I wouldn’t have believed him—about you—if I didn’t know that the Mules left behind had managed to create a female. I saw no reason they wouldn’t have created one on the darkship world, where I understand they’re more advanced.”

“I mean, you don’t care that the Mules survived the Turmoils and eventually became the Good Men?”

“What is there to care about?” he asked. “It happened.”

“But…aren’t you afraid of Mules?” I’d read the history books on Earth. Though I suspected the Good Men, who were after all the same people, were just as ruthless as the Mules had been, the history books made the Mules much worse. “Don’t you want to stop them?”

I swear his lips trembled upward. “Aren’t we?” he said. “Didn’t the Patrician declare the Glorious Revolution?” He seemed to suddenly remember how the Glorious Revolution had evolved. He shrugged. “I mean you no harm, at least. On the contrary. The Patrician said to get you to a safe place, and I intend to, even though it’s going to be harder than I’d imagined.”

“I don’t need to be gotten to a safe place,” I said. “If you know what I am, you know I’m as strong as the Patrician, and as capable of defending myself.”

He rolled his eyes. “And as full of yourself. Don’t either of you see virtue in planning? Are you in the habit of throwing yourself into danger with no thought?”

I'd come to Earth with very little thought, except to escape bad memories and certain social obligations. I didn't think I was full of myself. I certainly wasn't like Simon. On the other hand, I'd been telling Alexis that I could fight a mob singlehanded. Which seemed foolhardy if not stupid. So I shut up and let him lead—stumbling and skulking through the palace grounds. At an outer building, almost at the edge of the grounds, he made me wait, and came back moments later wearing coveralls of the sort that manual laborers wore, and carrying what looked like a green sheet, which he folded around me as a cloak, that covered me from head to the hem of my dress.

After that, he led me out of the grounds to what looked like a ramshackle stairway which led us into a labyrinth of derelict alleys and thus, eventually, to a cheap rented room, in a not so good section of Liberte, the area that was the domain of servants and less reputable avocations. We had chosen the cheapest of automated motels and paid for it with an anonymous credgem.

In the dingy rented room, Alexis ditched the coveralls to appear again in the splendor of white satin and gold braid. It went badly with his appearance. He was a middle-aged man, at least ten years older than my twenty-five, with short dark hair and a square face that only a mother could love, and which, indefinably, put one in mind of a bulldog. Seeing me look, he gave me a feral grin and said, "Alexis Brisbois, at your service, Madame Zenobia Sienna."

I didn't know what to answer, so I didn't. I dropped the sheet. He locked the door, then stood by it, with a burner in his hand, and his ear set against the dimatough panel.

"Just making sure no one followed us," he said. Though he'd ensured that the camera over the door was broken—not unusual in this type of lodgings, of course—he didn't trust that someone might not be looking for us or might not have caught a glimpse of us by other means.

While he went over the room, looking for hidden cameras and disabling a couple of gadgets that might or might not have visual-pickup capacity, I stood in front of the mirror that took up an entire wall—and I tried not to think exactly what it was meant to reflect, fully turned towards the bed as it was. But even thinking about that was better than thinking that I was in an enclosed space with no help anywhere near.

I must go out. I didn’t want to hide in this ratty room forever, with or without Brisbois, and I thought his idea of getting me out of the seacity was cowardly as well as futile.

Fortunately, he had no authority over me. No one did. First I had to get out of this room. Unfortunately, it seemed whatever was happening out there was definitely a revolt against the ruling classes. That meant that being known as the Patrician’s *special friend* told against me. I had to figure out how to make myself less remarkable-looking, less memorable, if I was going to move unremarked through Liberte seacity.

In my mind, I had only the vaguest idea of what I could do once I got out of here. Rescue Simon, of course, both because I owed him for his hospitality and to pay him back for trying to protect me, as though I were helpless without him. Pay him back in more than one sense.

I hated to admit that Alexis Brisbois had a point, though. When going against one enemy, force and intelligence sufficed. When going against a multitude, one must manage anonymity and surprise. And anonymity was going to be a problem.

It’s not that I think I’m beautiful, or that I know I am. I do, both. And it’s not personal opinion. Like everything else about me, it’s a certainty—what I was designed to be. No choice or opinion involved.

The men who created me had thought themselves if not gods, something very close. And though I’d been created to be the female version of one of them—built in a lab, protein by protein, gene by gene—they’d made me both beautiful and memorable. I looked as close as anyone living could look to the central figure of Sandro Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus.” My eyes were a little less innocent, I suppose, and I kept my hair long enough to hit the middle of my back, not falling in a red-blond mass almost to my knees, as the hair of the painted Venus did. But I did look like her. I knew.

Simon had taken me to where the painting was kept, in a vault to which it had been moved after the destruction of Florence. I think he believed the resemblance would flatter me. Instead, it had made me shake my head at the folly of the man from whose genes I was created and his old friend who’d helped him to make me. I’d known his friend. He’d been a sort of an uncle to me growing up. Until I saw that painting, I’d never realized he was insane. Broken, divided, lost, yes, but not mad.

So in that cheap hotel room, looking at my all too memorable reflection, I thought I must dye my hair brown. I must have said it aloud, because Alexis made a sound from the door. When I looked at him, I found him glaring back at me, over his shoulder. “You’re going about it all wrong,” he said. He looked disgusted or perhaps pitying. His face was hard to read.

I lifted my eyebrows at him, in an enquiry I didn’t know how to phrase, then said, “But I can’t stay here,” I said. “You must understand, I wasn’t made to sit and watch. I was told—”

He sighed. He sighed as though he were faced with all the stupidity of the world. He shook his head, shrugged. “I can’t convince you to be sensible, can I? At least allow me to represent to you that going out there, like this, with no idea of what you face and no more ability to move unnoticed in this world than a twenty-foot butterfly, is little less than suicide. If the whole seacity has decided to turn against the Good Man and anyone associated with him, you can’t fight them alone. If, on the other hand, it’s a small group causing all this, we can plan and overcome them.”

I was about to argue but stopped. I wasn’t completely stupid. It was just his assumption of mastery that bothered me. But he was right.

Alexis’s voice was low and raspy, and had just the edge of an accent. “Let me go and reconnoiter. I’ll bring you more clear intelligence, which you can use in your decision. You might still choose to risk yourself, but you’ll do it under advisement and that might fulfill what the Good Man meant by keeping you safe.” For some reason, unlike the edge of an accent that made Simon sound aristocratic and intriguing, it made Brisbois sound like a peasant, slow of thought. I realized the hands holding the burner were large and rough-looking, as if he tilled fields or built houses by hand in his spare time. “I doubt this entire riot is targeted at you specifically, but it doesn’t need to be particular to be fatal. And if you have to disguise yourself, dyeing your hair brown is all wrong.”

I looked back at the glass, and spoke to his reflection in the glass.

“What do you *think* is happening?” I said. I scanned his face for a hint of alarm, a look of…something that would give me an idea of what was likely to happen what the limits of possibility were. He was of Earth and more likely to understand better than I. I didn’t want a disaster to take me by surprise. Not again.

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t like to say. I can’t be sure. I suspect, but…” He took a long, deep breath. “Only, in this situation, acting on a suspicion and being wrong might land us in worse trouble than we’re in already.”

“Right,” I said. “But not acting can kill us too, no? We can’t hide here until they track us down!” He’d lowered his eyebrows over his dark eyes, as though in deep thought. “Look, people broke into the palace. Into the ballroom. They weren’t the troops of the Good Men.” I remembered people in everyday outfits, normal looking people. I remembered blood and fire. “They can’t be that powerful. We should be able to do something, to rescue Simon.”

“No,” he said. “No. I’m almost sure they were…just people. And the people who fired at our flyer were the same. People from—People from here, people from Liberte. The transports never left the water, and I’m sure the Good Men aren’t behind this. But I’m not sure…” He made a sound of exasperation, as though his mind refused to formulate the words he needed in this situation. “I’m not sure who they’re hunting for, you understand? If it’s a list of names, I’m on that list or you are. Or are they just trying to kill a certain type of person? Or it might just be a spasm of rebellion against anyone perceived as wealthier or more powerful. I don’t know, and neither do you.”

“Simon said to get me out of there, but he didn’t come with us. He thought I was in danger and he was not, clearly.”

“No,” Alexis said. “I don’t think he thought he was in no danger. Don’t you know the Good Man would be gallant enough to rescue you while sacrificing himself? I do wonder what Good Man St. Cyr knew that—” He stopped. I didn’t say anything. Neither of us were sure of anything about Good Man St. Cyr, including being sure that he was still, at this moment, among the living. Remembering the invaders into his house and ballroom, the explosions, the destruction of what seemed like immutable order, I doubted it. On the other hand, I had the very strong impression that the ci-devant Good Man, by his own words Protector of the People, was not that easy to kill.

A long silence fell. Alexis kept his ear against the door. After a while he sighed. “Do you trust me?”

I wanted to say yes, but did I trust him? Define trust. I’d learned from the earliest age that I was different, and that trusting other people—even my

adoptive parents—to know what was best for me could be bad. Very bad. I'd learned early on to make my own way, to forge my own path.

I'd trusted one person in the world. Len, the pilot of my darkship. I'd married him too. And then I'd had to kill him, because the alternative was far worse.

But here, on this strange world, with this strange man I'd been thrust upon, what was trust? Could I trust him as I'd trusted Len? No. Could I trust him to not try to overpower me and take me away from danger, as he'd been ordered to do?

"You have orders," I said. "From the Good Man. Would you lie to fulfill them?"

Alexis laughed, a mirthless cackle. "Let me rephrase that," he said. "Do you trust me to tell you the truth if I promise to do so?" He seemed to search my face. "Yes, I promised to protect you to the best of my ability, but the Good Man transferred my loyalty to you. That means I protect you, but tell you the truth and let you decide what course you take. I don't think I could overpower you forever."

I thought of Simon ordering him to protect me. In the same way that I felt Simon would be very hard to kill, I had a strong feeling—belied by Simon's effete, frivolous appearance—that the ci-devant Good Man would be a very bad person to cross; and that Alexis, being his servant, would know that at an instinctive, deep-set level. On the other hand, I suspected Simon was remarkably intolerant of the lower classes giving him their opinions, and he would have trained this man to know that. So why was Alexis talking of having transferred his loyalty and of telling me the truth? "Who are you?" I asked. "And don't tell me *Alexis Brisbois*. Who are you? What are you to the Good Man St. Cyr?"

"Head of his security force," Alexis said. "If he's still alive, and if not —" He stopped. "Do you trust me to scout for you and do my best to protect you in whatever course of action you choose to take? If I promise to report to you faithfully, to help you rescue Simon and anyone else we can if at all possible?" He nodded at me. "Come. Surely you don't think I want everyone I worked with, my colleagues, my friends, my subordinates at the palace to die? If I hadn't been ordered to get you out and protect you, I'd be up there fighting. If we can save anyone, I'll accept your help. Do you trust me?"

It took me a moment, and I confess the answer came more from gut instinct than from reasoned thought, but I said, firmly, “Yes.”

He pushed the safety on his burner, handed it to me. “Then, trust me to disguise you. I can’t stand to be here and not be sure what’s happening out there, nor how much danger we’re in,” he said. “Or the danger everyone else is in. Nor what to do about it.” He took a deep breath. “I’m going out. You stay here. If anyone—anyone at all—knocks, ignore them. If anyone manages to open the door and it’s not me, shoot them. If…It might be better if they don’t capture you alive. If I don’t come back in…in two hours or so, you’re on your own. Try to make your way out, and *Que Dieu*—And try to be safe.”

I appreciated his not spelling out that if the burner was almost out of juice and I was out-shot, I should off myself. It was clear enough from what he didn’t say, but he didn’t say it. I’d made that decision of “better dead than captured” for Len once. I might have been wrong. Could I make it for me?

“When I come back, I shall knock this way,” he beat a distinctive rhythm on the sideboard by the bed. “Do you understand?”

My eyes might not be as innocent as those of Botticelli’s Venus, but they clearly had a way of looking startled and not fully sure of anything much. I knew this because throughout my life people had asked me if I fully understood unpleasant things and tried to prevent me from fulfilling my duty.

I nodded at Alexis, with a touch of impatience. “I understand,” I said. And I did. I might not understand the precise danger we stood in, but I understood that I was in danger.

He looked dubious, as though something in my look failed to reassure him, but he put his ear to the door, then opened the door a crack and looked out.

Turning back, he said, “I’ll try to be back. If I’m more than two hours, you’re on your own.”

And he left.

I stayed by the door, burner at the ready. The clock embedded into the wall above the mirror worked. Surprising, given the state of the rest of the lodgings. Looking at it, reminded me that time could pass much slower than any objective measurements showed.

It lacked five minutes to two hours since Alexis had left, when the knock came. I'd been considering what to do on my own and had almost decided I'd leave and search for a derelict building that I could occupy and from which I could range out to figure out what I could do to prevent more chaos and death.

Alexis knocked and I opened. He came in and tossed a bag onto the bed. "I got you hair dye. And an outfit. They're in the bag," he said, gesturing.

"But I want to know what's happening out there."

"I'll tell you. We're going to have to leave. It's…madness. Chaos unleashed out there. We'll have to get away. Clear away from Liberte. There's revolutionary guards; there's organized patrols. And then there are unorganized mobs, out for the blood of anyone who—of anyone connected with the administration."

"But Simon—" I said.

"We can't save him on our own," Alexis said. "Not against this. We'll need help. Remember I told you that you couldn't fight a multitude all by yourself? You can't. There's mobs, but behind them there's covert and implacable organization. I have some idea who is behind this, but no way to get at them on my own. They are seeking anyone connected to the Good Man, anyone who is—Anyone they can eliminate. The Good Man has friends outside the seacity. We must reach them and ask them for help."

"He could die while we do that!" I said.

"Then he'd be dead already," Alexis said. "But I don't think he is. I think the chaos is just dressing on the real action. I think this is a planned revolution; I think there are people in charge, people who've been waiting for an opportunity, and they know that the Patrician is worth more alive than dead."

"More?"

"As a hostage." He sounded impatient.

"A hostage to whom? The Good Men?"

He shrugged. "Them, or anyone else. The Good Men don't like their kind killed, not visibly, not even if they're rebels. They certainly don't like their kind killed by anyone but themselves. It might give people ideas. As for the Usaians, they don't like rebels killed, and they might intervene to save him just because of that. They might be willing to pay or sign a

nonaggression pact in exchange for Simon. First we need to get out of here. Then we'll figure out how to save him. We'll find outside help." And then, "You should be disguising yourself."

"I thought you said there was a better way than dyeing my hair!"

"You'll see."

I took the bag into the attached fresher and saw. Or thought I did. The hair dye he'd got me was not brown, but a cheap, obviously fake red. The bag also contained just as cheap, and equally obviously false makeup, contact lenses that changed my eyes to dark brown, and a dress that appeared to be made of some sort of plastic. It felt uncomfortable against the skin, but it changed my look completely. I'd been considering dyeing my hair brown or black and wearing a unisex suit of the sort that manual laborers used to cover up their real clothes. I now realized that would have made me stand out like someone who was trying to disguise herself.

This, though—from the obviously fake hair color, to the overdone makeup with my now-unremarkable brown eyes surrounded by black liner and highlighter, and with the cheap, but ruffled and ornamented pastel-pink dress—looked like I was trying to call attention to myself and had nothing too remarkable to make note of.

As I put the makeup on, it occurred to me that Alexis's competence in this particular situation was very odd. It didn't strike me as something people could simply think their way into. But who would the head of security of the Good Man St. Cyr have conspired against? And why and how would he have needed a disguise?

Whatever he was, whatever he had been, Alexis seemed like he had a lot of experience with conspiracy.

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Limiting Factor

"NOT PARTICULARLY EXPERIENCED," HE SAID, AS I CAME OUT OF THE FRESHER AND asked about his experience with undercover work.

He too had got dressed in the same sort of cheap-but-gaudy attire, in his case an aping of the tight pants with broad-shouldered jackets that Simon's circle wore—also made of plasticlike fabric in an unlikely sky-blue color. I noted that his gaze barely flicked over me, more as if verifying I'd done the job properly than with any prospective interest, no matter how remote. I wasn't used to indifference. Not that I minded it.

"It's just that I have some idea how to survive underground," he said. He shrugged again. "The Good Man Simon St. Cyr picked me out of death row. Insurrection. Activities against the state." He must have seen the expression on my face, as I was thinking these were strange qualifications to become the main chief of security to the Good Man. He grinned, a surprisingly attractive expression that made him look ten years younger, almost boyish. "Well, you see, his father had just become incapacitated and Simon—St. Cyr was replacing his father's security force with his own, so that, well…so we'd be loyal to him."

"And he was, of course, involved in rebellion himself. one of the Sans Culottes."

Alexis nodded. I got the impression that there was something more he wanted to say, but when he spoke again, what he said was, "I got us broomer suits. Used. Cheap. Pray we don't have to use them."

"Why?" Broomer suits were the padded leather clothes one had to wear when riding the antigrav wands that were forbidden in most places on Earth, but which people still rode anyway—either as a safety measure to escape from a crashing vehicle, or when they were up to something they didn't want the all-pervasive authorities of Earth to know about. Being illegal, brooms didn't have built-in trackers that were on every other vehicle.

“Because if we have to use brooms it means that we already botched all sane escape plans.” He looked at me, as though he were upset that I hadn’t picked up on the subtleties of the situation. “They’re monitoring traffic. Patrols and…every other way, even possibly infrared. I don’t want to travel long distance on a broom, but we might not be able to use a flyer. Flyers are much easier to trace.”

“Are you sure we have to leave the seacity to look for help? Can’t we contrive a plan to rescue Simon on our own, if it’s so difficult to leave?”

It seemed to me the longer we took to fight back the more people would die. It was well and good for Brisbois to say Simon was too valuable to be killed, but, as far as people knew, his family had ruled the seacity for years. Fearing him had been a matter of survival. They might not feel free until they killed him. I vaguely remembered it had been like that in old France. The king had had to die.

For the first time he showed a normal human emotion: there was raw fear in his eyes. He put his ear to the door again, as though to confirm there was no one outside. He turned around to face me, and his broad, homely face looked pale and haggard. “I…you’re going to think I’m insane, but it looks to me like we’re in the middle of new Turmoils.”

“New—?”

“Turmoils,” he said. “With a capital T. Historical disturbances, when all the bioed people were killed!” he said. “In Liberte, at least.”

I stared. He had to be exaggerating. You see, unlike most people on Earth, I had seen images of the Turmoils. Most people on Earth had heard of them, but not in the detail we’d heard of them in Eden, partly, I thought, to hide the fact that after the Turmoils the Mules—now calling themselves Good Men and pretending to be completely non-bioenhanced—had climbed back into power. On Earth, the pictures, videos and holos of that time period were restricted or censored. On Eden they were mandatory viewing, because that was our genesis story, the reason our ancestors had left, the reason we kept our home secret from Earth and guarded it.

For a while, at the end of the twenty-first, the fate of everyone on Earth had been determined at birth. Either you were one of the enhanced ones or you were a serf, at best a working drone, at worst one of the myriad dependent on the state for charity.

And then it had broken.

In Eden we were taught it had gone wrong because the biorulers, the Mules, weren't quite human. They were genetically human, mind. Made of human DNA. Yet they hadn't been raised as people, but as instruments of the state. They had no loyalty to humans or the ways of humans. They had wreaked havoc on the Earth while purporting to improve it. They'd destroyed vast portions of the fauna and flora of the continents and ruthlessly moved populations around, reduced some populations, enhanced others. We'd been taught it had gone wrong because governments were too powerful. Because one person, whether bioed or not, could not decide best for multitudes.

But in any case, the results had been disastrous. The rebellion against the Mules was known as "The Turmoils," capitalized, as though there had never been and there never would be worse disasters on Earth.

It had started as a hunt for the Mules left behind, but, as those proved elusive, it had expanded to a hunt for all the Mule servants left behind, and, finally, for anyone who was smarter, prettier, faster—anyone who could be bioed. In some places, they'd used gen readers to identify modified genes, but in most places beauty or competence were considered evidence enough.

Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, given the abilities they'd been endowed with, most of the Mules left behind had not only survived, they had gotten new identities and they'd thrived. They'd taken over. In the fullness of time they'd become the Good Men, Earth's rulers under a regime that forbid bioenhancing and research, and concentrated on keeping the Earth as stable as possible. Having defeated the cloning stops in their genes, they'd also stayed in power. To keep up appearances, they had their brains transplanted into the bodies of their supposed sons, generation after generation and inheriting from themselves, to hold the Earth in an immutable grip.

Simon had escaped the fate of the other sons of Good Men, of becoming a body donor for his "father," because his father had suffered a disabling accident before he could have the operation performed. Simon had figured out the system and what his fate would have been. I didn't know if he'd become a rebel then, or if he'd been a rebel before. A few other sons of Good Men had escaped the brain-transfer, and were part of the Earth-wide revolution raging against the old regime. I'd met two of them: Lucius Dante Maximilian Keeva and Jan Aldert Hans Reiner.

It was impossible there could be Turmoils in a world where most of the territory was still in the control of the Mules-by-another-name, still part of the regime that had given Earth a vaunted three-hundred-year-long stability. Wasn't it? I backed up to sit on the bed. "What do you mean Turmoils? What would precipitate Turmoils?"

I couldn't read him. I couldn't tell if he was confused or upset, or if he felt sorry for me. It was all there, but what he said aloud was, "I think." He swallowed. "I think it's just as it was, and that they're hunting down and killing anyone they believe is bioed. That was…the raid on the palace, the people surrounding the seacity. Not the Good Men, but the people, in the territories and in the other seacities. Most of the people here are administrators, so they think…"

"That they're bioed?"

He nodded. "It was always a danger. The Sans Culottes, you know, want equality, so they swear allegiance to natural people, not to any state. And now they know the Good Man is not precisely of the people, not like the rest of us. And they whipped up a frenzy of *maybe there are more. If the Mules lied and took over again, they might be all over*."

"How do they know?"

He made a gesture, like it was all up. "The Usaians," he said, referring to the messianic cult that had modeled their revelations on the principles of the long-vanished country which used to occupy vast portions of North America, the same cult that was now firmly in control of Olympus seacity and its dependencies. "They broadcast—Their propaganda station—They broadcast the truth about the Good Men."

I looked blankly at him for a moment. It had been part of the regime of the Good Men to prevent wide broadcasting and news reporting except by those licensed to do so. The technological stop for such activity was in Circum Terra. Simon and I had been part of an invading party that had taken control of the station and removed those controls.

"But how can that be in their interest?" I said. "Lucius Keeva, in Olympus, is as much of Mule stock as the rest of them, and he's the face of the Usaian revolution."

"Oh, they've convinced everyone he is *different*. He saved one of their own. Some act of heroism or other, all conveniently filmed." He made a face, then a dismissive hand gesture. "The thing is, we have nothing like it.

And it’s different, anyway. The Usaians want only equality under the law, but our movement was supposed to make everyone equal. Really *equal*.” He sounded almost desperate. “The law can’t make you *really* equal.”

A sarcastic voice at the back of my mind asked how they intended to perform this miracle, but I didn’t say it. He went on, “So, when they found out what Good Man St. Cyr was, he wasn’t an acceptable Protector. Some hotheads got to talking, out in Shangri-la, likely in some tavern or bar or diner, and they decided that he was just doing what they’d done before, the Mules becoming Good Men and some people, not quite hotheads, who had been plotting this for a long time, found the opportunity they needed to ignite a revolution only they have the power to control. A revolution far more destructive than we anticipated. The Good Man is caught in it, and—”

“And?”

He bowed his head. “We’ll need help. Don’t tell me you’re enhanced. The Mules were enhanced. But they fled or laid low until the madness of the crowds passed.”

“We can’t wait that long. Did they capture Simon?”

Alexis frowned. He looked puzzled or perhaps upset. When someone has a face that doesn’t owe much to beauty and which time has etched with wrinkles clearly due to frowning a lot, it’s hard to tell if they’re frowning or merely thinking. “Yes,” he said. “Or at least the word is that they’re trying to trade him to the Good Men, in exchange for a promise not to invade and not to pursue their vengeance against the revolutionaries. The revolutionaries hope to establish their own fiefdom here, with no interference. They’d rather reign in a tiny place than get in an enormous war they’d be sure to lose.” He took a deep breath. “The other people—The people at the palace…Most of them. Not all, but most of them…” He made a gesture with his hand. “Heads on stakes.”

There was a suppressed emotion. I thought the words were compromise words for what he’d really like to say. For “people at the palace” he most likely meant “my friends, my subordinates, everyone I knew.” For “heads on stakes,” “they were all killed.”

I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

“We must go outside the seacity to find friends of the Patrician,” he said. “The people in Olympus owe him.” He stopped as though it had occurred to him such debts are often hard to collect and said, on a down

note, “The Remys like him. They were children together. Or at least they were young together. Same broomers’ lair.”

This much was probably true. The Remys, retainers to the Good Man of Olympus, seemed to include Simon in their adventures and they had indeed been part of an illegal broomers’ lair together.

“But you said it’s turmoils against bioed people. It can’t be. There are no bioed people anymore. There haven’t been since the late twenty-first, right?”

“From my looks no one would ever suspect me of being bioed, right?” He shrugged. “But people knew me by sight, and someone might recognize me.” He looked up at me. “And you—Well, if they see you! I mean, you did a good job, but anyone who looks at you too intently…” He shrugged. “Bioed people escaped back in the Turmoils and a lot of those who served or serve the Good Men…the hereditary families, are bioimproved in some way. At least people say it’s obvious, looking at them. And their existence is an affront to equality. No one can be equal if some people were designed not to be.”

“But no one can be equal,” I said, and refrained from pointing out that if my readings of history were right, there had been enough variation before bioing. “How can they enforce everyone being equal? People are born different, too.”

He shrugged again. “Yes, but it’s not so obvious, or at least it’s not deliberate. It’s an act of God or fate or providence. *Allons,* that’s what they say, and so, anyone who worked for the Good Men, particularly those in hereditary positions, but even the others, too, were considered…suspect. And so…We must go. You and I can’t save anyone alone. Not against a whole seacity. If we try we’ll just end up dead. And we can’t find others, if there are still others, not without going back to the palace or chancing capture ourselves. And then the Good—the Protector will die for sure. But if we get help, we’ll have a chance.”

I hesitated. A chance. Just that. I wanted to say I could take on the whole seacity with my hands tied behind my back. But while I might be faster than any one person, stronger than any three people, I knew I was no match against five hundred thousand. “And so, what do we do? You got us in these outfits, and I agree we will pass at least cursory glance. So, we’re a not-very-well-off couple out for a night on the town, right?”

He bit his lower lip. “I have arranged for a car. *Enfin*, my service has… had resources. It is my hope,” he said, “that we leave the seacity and…go to the Good Man’s friends. Olympus. Olympus would work. They would know how to help me free him. And how to protect you.”

I understood without being told that it wasn’t even a matter of loyalty or of doing as he was told. No. Alexis was holding on to these orders as the one thing still giving structure to his life in a world gone suddenly insane. I didn’t say that having people working on protecting me made me feel like a coward.

“Once we’re out of the hotel—can we get out of this seacity?”

“If we look like them, if we say we’re going to Shangri-la, or…or something, to see my mother, yes, we can. I think. From what I saw and heard, at least, it won’t be easy, but it shouldn’t be impossible.”

“Your mother lives in Shangri-la?”

He shook his head, and who was I to ask him questions? After all, he might not want me to know where his family was. Why would he trust me? I was a stranger tossed into his lap. More or less literally.

“Once we’re out of the seacity, you’ll have discharged your duty.” I said. “I’m sure there is no large-scale hunting of those who might be bioed going on elsewhere. I’ll be safe. And then I might come back with the rescuing party.”

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Who Goes There?

ALEXIS KNEW EXACTLY WHERE THE TRANSPORT WAS, AND IT MUST HAVE BEEN VERY carefully procured because it looked nothing like an official vehicle.

It certainly didn't look like anything that the Good Man would own. Parked in a narrow, deserted street, the flyer was gray, battered, with cracks showing on its ceramite finish. It was the sort of vehicle a very young man or a very poor one could own. It opened at the touch of Alexis's finger in the genlock. We'd come to the street through a network of back streets, past bars and diners, past repair shops and used clothing stores.

Through it all, I kept my ears open and stayed alert, not because I didn't trust Alexis, but because I didn't trust anyone, because I had need of making sure he hadn't lied to me simply to remove me from the seacity; because I had to make sure he wasn't betraying me, or, worse, betraying Simon.

What I heard confirmed Alexis's appraisal of the situation. First of all, there was the smell. Have you ever smelled large-scale burning? I hadn't. I came from a colony world. Eden existed inside a hollowed-out asteroid. If we burned anything much, it would play havoc with the atmosphere scrubbers. And yet, I knew when I smelled burning that it wasn't the normal burning of a log in the fireplace or a campfire like the one that Simon had built on his land to show me what it looked like. No. This was a…the only way to describe it is "dirty smell" compounded of chemicals and seared flesh and other things not meant to be burned.

And then there were the sounds. Echoes of singing, that even at this distance, with no words audible, sounded angry. Explosions. The occasional scream. And laughter. The laughter was the worst.

So I tried to help Alexis pass, to make us go unnoticed, to help us escape. I'd put my arm through Alexis's and tried to babble about what we were passing. I wasn't sure this was right. Len and I hadn't talked much in the end because, like all navigators and pilots from Eden, we had a

bioengineered mind link to each other. And it was probably not the normal talk. He knew what I was and so did I. And we had mind-to-mind communication, a handy thing engineered into nav and cat pairs. So there had been no need for much talk.

But I leaned into Alexis and tried looking affectionate. Would a couple out for a day together talk about the disturbing events around them, or not? I didn't. I talked of the dress and the weather, and an advertisement moving murkily on a shop window.

The scary thing about these streets was how quiet they were. Sounds came from other areas, but not here. I'd been here before, on normal evenings, and they'd been full of people. People on their way to work, people looking for a meal, people out with lovers or friends or relatives.

Now the streets spread out, empty, with closed shops on either side shining forlorn lights from the windows and their signs onto the pitted dimatough pavement. Even the eating establishments were closed. I wondered how many of the owners, how many of the residents in this unglamorous part of Liberte seacity were actually home, hiding behind their closed doors and their shuttered windows. And how many were elsewhere in the seacity? How many had been part of the mob that had taken over the palace?

Explosions illuminated our surroundings in sudden orange bursts. But as far as I could tell, the explosions, the action were all on other levels in the seacity, above or below, accessible only by stairways and the public elevators, if those were still running.

We found the battered gray flyer, and Alexis opened it without a word. Inside, it was very clean and smelled vaguely of lemon, but the seats were cracked, and the controls looked shopworn.

Instead of taking off directly from parking, he flew just a little above the surface down the network of streets, as though the flyer were a ground vehicle. He caught my puzzled glance and said, "If we take off, we will be shot down. The word is out that there is an area from which we can take off. The Revolutionary Guard is vetting everyone allowed off the seacity. Not that they…" He shrugged. "They want to be sure, you know, that no one escapes."

The thought came through that he might just be intending to turn me in, to have me killed as the price of his escape. Still, I remembered Simon

more or less throwing me at Alexis, and directing Alexis to keep me safe, the desperate note but also the absolute trust in Simon's voice. Sometimes the best you can do is trust that others know what they're doing.

We flew at near ground level all the way to an area that might have been a parking lot in happier days. Now, there were some charred hulls of flyers, obviously set on fire. I wondered what had happened to the occupants, and refused to look too closely, just in case they were still there.

There were also other flyers, like ours, with people inside them, forming an irregular line. Down each side of the line came young men armed with burners. They were wearing red Frisian caps. I didn't wonder at it. It had been part of the paraphernalia of the Sans Culottes, and Simon himself had worn one when he declared his own reign over and the transition to the Tenth Republic initiated. But there was something to the way these young men wore it that implied they were more serious—or at least less careless—of all that those caps implied. Liberty caps. I knew from Eden the history of the revolution they were associated with. Not in detail. It was ancient history, after all, and I was not a historian. But enough to know that it had become a bloodbath. I clutched my hands on either side of my seat and held on.

One of the young men came to our window and bent to look through it at us—dark brown hair, gray eyes, a face that looked as though it had been smudged in an explosion, with a sort of sneer that might mean pride or fear. Or both. "What business do you have flying out?" he asked. His voice was raspy. "And who are you?"

"I'm Alexandre," Alexis said. "Alexandre Borde. This is my friend, Madeleine Fabron. We're—That is—" He looked equal parts confused, scared, and perhaps embarrassed. "My mother is scared. In Shangri-la. She was on the com to me, and she's scared. We're flying back to stay with her."

The young man's lip curled upward. "You're from Shangri-la?"

"Yeah," Alexis said. "I work there, at the Debussy café. I'm the cook."

The young man looked over at me. "Madeleine is the waitress there," Alexis said. I realized that the light over the passenger seat was broken and wondered if he'd meant it that way. Then I told myself, of course he meant it that way. I was not in the hands of a casual conspirator. His words *I was on death row for revolutionary activities* came back to me, and I wondered what those activities had been. Had he tried to overthrow the government of

the Good Men? Had it all been propaganda and the distribution of pamphlets against their rule? Or had it been something more material? I had heard it was possible to get killed simply for disagreeing with them, but I didn't know if that was true.

The young man sneered at me, and made a comment—fast and in archaic French—at Alexis, who looked startled then said, "Eh," and shrugged. "She is a pretty one, but not that kind of girl."

I thought he'd seen enough of me to think I looked too pretty. We'd aroused suspicion. From the other side, far away on the left, was the sound of a burner zapping, and then an explosion and screams. Our inspector barely lifted his head. "Stupid," he said. "But they will try to escape, those improved ones."

I realized my heart was pounding. Pounding so fast I was afraid he'd hear it.

He looked at us again. "Where in Shangri-la does your mother live?"

Where do our decisions come from?

I'd never even been in a firefight before. I had fought duels—most people in Eden do, growing up—but they had been bare hands or, on one memorable occasion, daggers. I won't say I'd never thought of killing someone. I had. When I thought my life was in danger. But I'd never actually pulled the trigger. Except the once, with Len. But that had been different.

Now, there was no time to think—no time to run through the consequences of my actions. I saw the young man reach for a com at his belt, and I moved with the super speed that had been originally engineered into the man whose genes I carried. I took out the burner, set it on cutting beam, leaned past Alexis. I ran the beam clear through our questioner's heart before he could react. I punched the takeoff button on the flyer on the way to leaning back in my seat.

I still don't know why we weren't shot out of the air. Unless it were because we were up in the air and flying fast by the time the young man in the liberty cap even fell. Plus, I'd used the cutting feature, not the fire one, so they might not even know he was dead, until they got close enough to him to see the blood. And by then we were well away, up in the air.

My last view of Liberte seacity as we took off was a smoldering ruin where the wedding cake-topper palace had been. It looked charred and

black, like the skeleton of an ancient beast rising out of the dimatough base of the seacity.

We were slammed against the seat by the force of the takeoff. Burner rays spent themselves in our wake. Alexis got pushed back in his seat with a wide-eyed look in his eyes.

I felt like I had an elephant on my chest. But being stronger than normal people has its uses. I reached over and pressed the leveling button. Then I brought up the map, blindly, and punched remembered coordinates in. Olympus. As Alexis had said, Simon had friends there. Simon and I had helped them when they needed, and now was their turn. And I would see they followed through, if need be.

Alexis took a deep breath. He looked at me. I had shot a man in front of him, with very little provocation. I expected horror in his eyes, but there was only a sort of wondering look. “They will follow us,” he said.

“It will take them time to get in flyers and find us,” I said. “And they might not want to leave the seacity. By now word of what is going on out there must be on the coms. They’ll fear reprisals.”

Alexis took a large handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face. “Reprisals from whom?”

Again, where do our certainties and our actions come from? I hadn’t thought before I shot, but now I knew why I’d shot, and also why we hadn’t been killed yet. And I knew where the danger would come from for those running riot in Liberte. “Everyone, I should think,” I said. “Including the old Good Men, or do you think they’ll welcome a repeat of the Turmoils?”

Alexis nodded. “Why did you shoot him?” He didn’t ask me how I’d known the coordinates to set a course for Olympus, nor did he change it. Instead, he checked my settings, and made minor alterations. I realized he was changing it so we didn’t pass over areas currently controlled by the Good Man regime, and mostly kept us over Usaian-controlled areas. The question about the shooting was asked in a curious tone, too. I thought that most people—not that I understood much about most people, of course—would be shocked, or worried, or perhaps outraged at my killing someone. Instead, his question was wondering…like the question someone would ask in a classroom. Interested, not immediately pressing.

“He was suspicious,” I said. “And he was reaching for the com at his waist. He’d have called Shangri-la, and probably given the alarm before he

did. We'd have been surrounded and watched while he called to confirm our story. I figured if I killed him before he gave alarm…"

He raised an eyebrow, gave me another sidelong glance, and then was quiet. After a while, flying over the ocean, he said, "Was this the first person you killed?"

I shook my head, not wanting to explain about Len. I suppose it wasn't that hard to explain. We'd got attacked while trying to harvest powerpods in Earth's orbit, and he'd got a full shot of radiation. We didn't have anything aboard to cure radiation poisoning, not that extensive. So I'd given him the coup de grace, and limped back to Eden. But there were complications to the events.

Later I'd learned that, in the same situation, Kit—whom I suppose I could call my brother, the man made from the same genes that had created me—had instead taken his radiation-poisoned wife to Earth, and got her treated.

I knew the situations were not the same. Athena Hera Sinistra, Kit's wife, was, like me, the female clone of a Mule. But her "father" was the Good Man of Syracuse on Earth, and his willingness to do anything to cure her had made her treatment a foregone conclusion. Even then, escaping afterwards had been almost impossible. Len and I had no one on Earth. Even getting someone's attention would have taken longer than that, and chances were we'd both have gotten killed out of hand. And I might have been captured and tortured for the location of Eden. But what if? What if instead of killing him, I'd refused to concede? What if I'd done the crazy thing and flown to Earth? Would he still be alive today? I closed my eyes.

"Uh," my companion said.

I opened my eyes. "And you?" I said. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

He lifted his hand to his square face, and smoothed it down over the myriad little wrinkles as though of frowns past. He looked very tired. "Dozens of people."

Which I suppose made sense, right? He'd been head of security. It would involve neutralizing threats to the Good Man, right?

So why did his answer make me feel uneasy? Surely I hadn't taken him for an innocent lamb? What use would an innocent lamb be to me right now?

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust Alexis, for given values of trusting him. Simon had flung me into his arms with instructions to keep me safe. And he had. So far. And I didn’t think he was going to break his oath to Simon. Not really. And Simon might be slippery, but he did like me, and had been kind to me.

But Alexis had killed dozens of people. Really?

At any rate, soon I’d be in Olympus seacity and safe.

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And the Rock Cried Out

"I don't think I can help you," Lucius Keeva said. He was a large man and built with slab upon slab of muscle. It would have been easier if he were angry at me, or if he'd seemed emotional. Instead, he looked stern, controlled. In his sky-blue uniform, he gave the impression of being no more than the conveyance of the will of Olympus seacity and, at least if we believed what the locals believed, of its inhabitants.

We'd arrived to Olympus at sunrise, and identified ourselves to the questioning of the guards as we approached the Good Man's palace. Or what had been the Good Man's palace.

At first I'd thought that the change in Olympus, now fully in control of the Usaian movement, was the same it had been in Liberte seacity. The Good Man had proclaimed himself something else, and everything remained the same.

But it wasn't like that. I hadn't seen Lucius Dante Maximilian Keeva since our raid on Circum Terra six months ago. Back then I was very new to Earth—had just arrived there with a party from Eden. Just the sheer size of Earth, the ability to travel anywhere, to hide, to disappear, had overwhelmed me. Earth had been a kaleidoscope of images and sounds. More people than I'd ever seen in my life; more people than I'd ever known existed anywhere had crowded around me. And yet, I'd seen areas that were forgotten, lost—places with no humans at all.

When my friends had gone back to Eden, I'd taken my opportunity to run away from home in style, to stay behind in a whole world where no one knew me, where no one would expect anything of me.

Is there such a state for anyone human?

I'd lingered with someone who was kind to me and who protected me from the strangeness of Earth and made me feel welcome. A whole world,

many times larger than anything I knew—than anything I could even imagine, had proven too daunting.

Back when I'd last seen Lucius Keeva, he'd looked stern and remote and frightening. He still looked frightening. A very tall man, with long dark-blond hair, it was rumored he'd spent fourteen years in prison, in solitary confinement.

I wasn't sure that was true. I thought no one could survive that and remain functional, let alone sane enough to be one of the leaders of the Usaian revolution. But there was something different about him now from when I'd last seen him: a confidence, perhaps, a…but no, it wasn't swagger. A man who is six seven and built like an assault vehicle doesn't need to swagger. It is an alien art to someone that size.

Perhaps it was that he was no longer the Good Man, though I was having trouble pinpointing exactly what he was.

When we landed in what had been the Good Man's palace, the people had seemed puzzled as to whom I was asking for, when I asked to speak to the Good Man. At first I thought the difficulty was my pink and plastic-looking finery, or perhaps Alexis standing like a sullen statue behind me.

But when I said "Lucius Keeva," the two—well, I thought they were guards—very young men in sky-blue uniforms looked at each other.

"The lieutenant colonel, Ichabod," one of them—the blond one, the other one being dark-haired and olive-skinned—said. They seemed almost identical in everything else, particularly youth and very upright posture.

"Oh," Olive-skin said. And when I'd given my name, he'd said, "I'll be right back," and, leaving his friend with us, had walked fast into the house. I didn't know whether to consider that leaving us alone with one guard was a bad thing. The guard hadn't even taken out his burner. I wondered if Olympus was really lax about its security. Then I started suspecting that there was more to it than that, that there were other levels of security between us and the Good Man. But why were they calling him lieutenant colonel?

A few moments later, Ichabod returned, and the two guards escorted us down a cool corridor, into the depths of the house. I'd been right about one thing: the place was filled with men in uniform, all of them armed, saluting each other around every corner. Mostly our escorts saluted other people.

But since I didn’t know the insignia on people’s shoulders and chests, the distinctions evaded me.

Up a staircase, till we stood at the door to an office. Not a private office, but a huge room, filled with desks and activity. This one had at least fifteen desks, most of them manned by very young people. As we stood in the doorway, Lucius Keeva rose from behind one of the desks, which was piled high with paper and walked towards us. “Ms. Sienna,” he said, and to what must have been my startled expression, with a politeness that didn’t soften him in the slightest, “I beg your pardon. Am I forgetting a rank? Do you have one?”

I shook my head. I’d been Miss and Mrs, and Navigator Sienna, and I had no idea what I was now, but Ms. would do as well as anything. “Lieutenant colonel?” I said.

This brought a shadow of a smile to the man’s tired face. “Oh. That’s mostly a courtesy title. I pilot a desk. The military titles should be reserved for the people in the field, but I guess they needed to call me something.” He gave me a quick look, up and down. It wasn’t *that* sort of look. I happened to know Lucius Keeva’s interest in women was academic. It was an open secret and not just in Olympus that he and one of the Usaian leaders, Nathaniel Remy, were a couple. But his look clearly registered my incongruous attire, yet when he looked back up it was to say, “Call me Luce. We fought side by side; that warrants treatment of equals. And how may I help you?”

I can’t describe it. I’d expected…I wasn’t absolutely certain what I’d expected. I hadn’t got the impression that he and Simon were friends *precisely*. In fact, Simon had told me that he had been in the same broomer group as Lucius’s late brother, Max, but they’d never been that close. Friendly, sure, but not *friends*.

But Lucius had said we’d fought side-by-side. And so had he and Simon. I had been sure I could get help from him…help in rescuing Simon.

Then I found myself face to face with Keeva and couldn’t help acknowledging he was no longer the Good Man, no longer an autarch, but a man caught in the machinery of an organization he couldn’t control and I couldn’t understand. And something in his reserved, guarded expression made me feel I was up against something inflexible and hard. My heart sank.

“Simon,” I said, not expecting anything. “I need help for Simon. Simon was captured.”

Luce nodded. “We heard news…I was afraid you were both dead. It was a relief to see you here,” he said, then looking behind me. “And—”

“This is Alexis. Alexis Brisbois. He is—was the head of Simon’s security.”

“Secret police,” Alexis offered, and also offered his hand. There was a momentary but visible hesitation before Lucius shook it.

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “The attack on the palace was a shock, of course. Simon had invited me to the ball, but I couldn’t get away, and besides—” He frowned fleetingly. “It was considered too risky. My value to the cause might be largely ornamental, but it has value.” He sighed. “I’m sorry, the damned house is mostly taken up with the operations of the Daughters of Liberty.” And to our blank look, “The propaganda arm of my —The propaganda arm of our revolution.” And then, though I hadn’t asked, “It’s not a gender thing. The Sons of Liberty are the active troops.”

He shook his head. “I have a private area, for my use. Please come with me. You’ll want a bath.” The impersonal evaluating look raked me up and down again, and said that if it were him wearing that kind of *finery*, he’d want a bath.

The idea of Lucius Keeva in a plastic dress, with badly dyed hair, made me want to giggle. Perhaps it was a stress thing. When you’ve been running for your life, emotions seem to become compacted, close together and you can flip from intense grief, or intense fear, to sudden laughter, then back again. It took a great effort for me to suppress it and by the time I had it under control, he was leading us along another set of hallways. He stuck his finger in a genlock, which sprang open. What we entered could have passed for an upscale apartment in a modern building, a white carpeted area furnished with the sort of understated simplicity that screams wealth.

Lucius gestured at a hallway at the back of the living room. “At the end of that there is a bedroom, and a fresher. I’ll have clothing brought to you. Sorry, I no longer have staff. Everyone either left, or is working for the revolution. But someone should be able to unearth a comfortable outfit your size somewhere. Martha Remy, if no one else.” He punched a com button in a nearby console and spoke so quickly and so tersely that I didn’t understand much, except that he was speaking to someone with whom he

was comfortable and asking for clothes, and also that that appraising glance had got my size to a nicety. There was an equally terse answer from the other end. “Will do.”

He turned to me and smiled. “There will be clothes for you in the bedroom when you’re done with the fresher.” He turned to Alexis. “You’ll have to wait your turn, Brisbois.” And, advancing towards an impressively stocked drinks table, he said, “What do you drink?”

Which, I thought, was just like men, sending me off to wash, while they drank and, doubtless, Lucius Keeva got an accurate report of the revolution and the mess in Liberte from Alexis Brisbois.

I was in the spacious, and certainly luxurious, fresher and scrubbing the outrageous makeup off my face when it occurred to me that I’d been positively itching to get out of this; that Alexis was probably better equipped to explain the military situation to Keeva, and that they were not being slighting but gallant, giving me first shot at getting out of what were clearly uncomfortable as well as awful-looking clothes.

Still, I washed as fast as I could, and rushed out, to find that indeed there were clothes waiting for me: a black pair of pants and a gray tunic in roughly my size. Lifting them, I found underwear underneath, and pulled that on first, in a hurry. Then I ran my fingers through my wet hair and rushed out, barefoot.

The men had sat down across from each other with glasses of something amber in their hands. They both rose as I came in. “Ms. Sienna,” Lucius said. “May I offer you something to drink?”

“Whatever you’re having,” I said.

He lifted his eyebrows, but I wasn’t quite up to the variety of drinks on Earth. I knew that some of them weren’t considered ladylike—whatever that might be—but I had yet to taste one I couldn’t drink. None of these people had, after all, been raised on the particularly noxious drink my countrymen made from fermented bugs.

He handed me a glass of amber liquid that smelled alcoholic and peaty. I took a short sip, determined this was a drink to take slowly, and did so. “What did Alexis tell you?” I asked.

“Everything,” Alexis said. “Everything I know.”

I wondered if that was true. I suspected Alexis Brisbois didn’t tell everything he knew, not even to himself. Not if he could help it.

“And now you may go clean up,” Lucius said. It wasn’t an order, but it was. Alexis hesitated, but he got up and said, looking at me, “I’ll be right back.”

I wondered what he feared, exactly, from Lucius. I didn’t think he intended to attack me. But Lucius waited till Alexis had vanished into the room beyond, before saying, “Ms. Sienna?”

“Zen.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“If you’re Luce, I’m Zen.”

“Very well, then, Zen. What…what is your relationship with Simon?”

“What?”

“Your…relationship. Are you…involved?”

“He—” I said. The problem with Simon is that you couldn’t help liking him. But it came to me that one always felt slightly guilty for doing so. “He has been very kind to me. He’s…he let me live in his palace and…and get acclimated to Earth. I suppose you could say we are friends.”

A short silence, then he frowned. “Yes, but…but that covers a vast array of terrain. Excuse me, but…are you emotionally involved?”

Was I emotionally involved? What did he even mean? “I owe him a debt,” I said, stubbornly. “I think he…I think he likes me very much, but—”

“But?”

“I can’t…I think he arranged for an innocent man to murder his fath—predecessor. I think he enjoys power and being the center of the seacity. He says he loves me, but I can’t tell if he means it, or is just playing at it.”

“Oh.” Lucius smiled suddenly, as though startled. It was an odd smile. Fleeting. When I’d met him before, we’d been in battle mode. I realized for the first time he’d been raised in the same world as Simon, if not in the same way; that he could probably be charming, if he wanted to, in a way that meant absolutely nothing. The smile was followed by a sigh. “Oh, likely neither can he. Simon—” He paused. “Simon’s…ancestor was created as a spy and someone who could play any role, and I don’t think Simon’s situation these last few years, knowing he was not like the other Good Men and remaining safe only by playing the fool and encouraging the idea his “father” might recover, helped whatever inherent tendencies were in his make-up.”

I nodded. I'd known about Simon's original, the person he was cloned from; had learned it from someone who'd known the original. As for Simon playing the fool, I knew that too. I didn't think I could explain—or wanted to explain—to Lucius the glimpses of someone more substantial beneath Simon's playacting. Saving me at the expense of himself, even as his world quite literally crashed around his head, was not the act of a self-centered fool. I didn't think I could explain that I felt as though someone were a prisoner, encased, in Simon's playacting. Nor could I explain the sympathy I felt for his situation. So I said, "Yes."

He nodded. "But that doesn't answer my question. Are you involved? Physically or emotionally?"

"What difference does that make?" I asked.

He let air out through his nose. "It might. In how much I can help, within my limited capacity." He raised a hand. "No, look. Our organization—not the military, but the organization that predates it—has an unbreakable policy of helping dependents: children and spouses or spouses equivalent. I can't get you help officially, not from Olympus, that is, but you did render the Usaians a service, and though it's stretching a point, I can take it to the council. If you're Simon's—If—"

I sighed. "We're not. Not that close, and not physically. I was widowed less than a year ago. I'm not ready—"

"Understood. And emotionally?"

"I care for him," I said. "Possibly more than I should—but I'm not sure how…" I looked up at those blue-gray eyes staring down at me like a judge from a podium. "Look, I don't know if I have the slightest romantic interest in him, or if it's just…just that I feel sorry for him. I always feel bad for people who are ducks out of water, because I am myself."

This surprised a chuckle out of him. "Yes," he said. "I do too, for the same reason. That's why I said I'd help to the limit of my ability, but my ability is very limited. I can't go with you and help you. I'm needed here. My superiors would skin me alive for risking myself in the hell Liberte has become. And we can't send troops into the mess in Liberte because we don't have troops to spare."

The meaning of his words so far had sunk in—and I understood the sense of cold I'd got from our reception. It wasn't so much that he didn't

want to help us, but that even if he wanted to, he couldn't. "But you're the Good Man!" I said. "You can order someone like Nat Remy—"

I realized I'd gone too far. His gaze hardened. "I'm not the Good Man," he said. "Not anymore. Unlike Simon, I didn't declare the revolution, nor do I control it, as he thought he did. And as for Nat, he's in enough danger without sending him on what will turn out to be a suicide mission. Even if I had the power to order him, which I don't. I don't remember the rank in his last letter. It seems to keep changing. But I warrant you he's my superior."

"Suicide?" I said.

"What do you think? You know more history than most people on Earth—So do I, for my sins. When a land, or in this case, a group of territories, takes it upon their head to make all humans equal, it always ends one way. It's not that reality can't be violated," he said, and sounded suddenly very tired. "It's that there is always a price to pay for it. Always. And the price for the fantasy of equality is always paid in blood." He looked very sad but mostly very tired. Then his expression changed in a second, as he looked over my shoulder at someone behind me. "Ah. Brisbois. I would extend you the hospitality of my house, but as you see my quarters are reduced to a single guestroom, and I am about to offer that to Ms.—to Zenobia."

"I can sleep anywhere," Alexis said. I turned around to see that he had changed appearance almost as markedly as I had. He looked yet completely different from the man I'd guess I had glimpsed around the palace, in a formal and undistinguished gold and white uniform. And he looked again different than the man in cheap clothes who'd brought me here.

I didn't know what clothes Lucius had arranged for him, and I hadn't paid attention, but now I remembered seeing a young man in uniform walk in and down that hallway carrying clothes. The clothes Alexis Brisbois was wearing were the formal attire of the upper-crust of Earth, such as I'd seen Simon wear. Silk shirt with lace at collar and sleeves. A velvet jacket with shoulder padding that, in his case, wasn't necessary, narrowing to make the waist look small—in his case not very convincingly because the man was a single square block of stonelike muscle—and ornamented with ruffles at the back. The pants fit like a second skin under all that, and the boots came to meet the pants just above the calf.

Lucius Keeva frowned at the boots. “I beg your pardon about those,” he said. “But I think your feet are at least a size larger than mine.” His gaze swept upwards. “The rest fits well enough.”

I realized these had to be Keeva’s clothes, and that the two men were almost exactly the same size. How had I not noticed it before? They were very different types of men. Lucius might be scarred, but the features beneath that were regular and beautiful enough. Carefully assembled, likely. As carefully as mine had been, gene by gene and protein by protein. Alexis’s had been assembled by an unkind Mother Nature. Living couldn’t improve on them. They weren’t exactly horrible to look at, but they were rough-carved and only the intelligent and attentive eyes beneath the heavy eyebrows relieved what would otherwise have been a brutal aspect.

Besides, there was posture. Lucius Keeva had been trained to command, and he looked every inch of his six feet six or seven, or perhaps more. Alexis, on the other hand, whatever he had been, wherever he’d come from—conspirator, condemned man, servant—would have been trained to hide his size and any appearance of menace. And he managed to project being much shorter and smaller than he was. But he was massive. No wonder he’d been able to drag me. And no wonder Simon trusted him to keep me safe.

“As I was saying,” Lucius said. “I can offer hospitality to Zenobia, and you can trust me to keep her safe as your…ah…Good Man commanded. But I don’t think I can accommodate you, at least not for the night. You can have dinner with us.”

Alexis looked like he was going to protest, but Lucius interrupted, “Through that door, there is a young man waiting. An ensign. I can’t for the life of me remember his name, they change so fast.” Tiredness again. “We send them out to fight much too early. But he’ll show you to the unmarried men’s quarters. You can make sure you have a place for tonight and then you can come back here, if you choose, for dinner or to verify I haven’t killed Zenobia. But I assure you, it’s not needed.”

Alexis looked like he was going to protest. There was a mutinous look in his eyes, and he looked like he wanted to give vent to it. Perhaps he would have, but I suspected the training to obey people who acted this way and gave orders this smoothly went bone deep. He didn’t exactly bow, and he didn’t exactly make a sound of acquiescence, but there was a suggestion of both in the way he headed out the door.

And I felt, unaccountably, bereft, as though I too couldn't trust Lucius Keeva not to do something awful to me. Which was ridiculous, of course. I could at least trust him as much as I trusted Brisbois. As Luce had said, we'd fought side by side.

I returned to where I'd been before Brisbois had interrupted us. "Suicide?"

"What do you think it is, for any of us, the ones who look obviously modified, or at least…enhanced, to go to Liberte? If they're hunting for those who stand out? We'd stand out just for being strangers—foreign. And what do you think our chances are of doing anything in time to free Simon?"

"I was hoping for armed men." I stepped backwards, to let myself fall onto a chair. "So, when you offered help—"

He shook his head. "I could have got you help if you were…involved with Simon. Some help. Not personally," he said. "Certainly not personally. My face is too well known the world over. And not Nat. If you saw him fighting on broomback, or really just fighting, you'd know his enhancements are as hard to hide as ours. Hereditary, sure. I don't think his line has seen the inside of a test tube for generations." He paused, as though a sudden thought had intruded, and chewed at the corner of his lip, as though trying to digest an unpleasant thought. "Though I wouldn't bet on it either. But I understand they're going after people who inherited enhancements, too. And most of my helpers, most of my circle here, is obviously enhanced. So I couldn't ever offer you help of that kind. But… since you're not involved with Simon, I don't think I can even offer you that."

I started to say that I could lie about being involved with Simon, then I thought about the implications—this would be claiming a relationship on the level of marriage. It probably meant that if we saved Simon, I'd have to stand by it. I'd been married once. I thought of Len, of what I'd had with him. Simon was a different creature. "I'd been dreading his proposal."

"Understand," Luce said. "I'm not trying to be unkind, but I think that to attempt to save Simon right now is nothing more than a complex way to commit suicide unless you went in with overwhelming force, and I don't know if we can get overwhelming force."

I bit my tongue, but I couldn't keep it in. "We helped when you needed it. He helped with your…revolution. But now you turn your back on him."

He let air out through his nose with a noise like a sneeze, but infused with something like repressed temper. "No. Simon helped us when it suited him. Yes, he was part of our councils and our efforts, because he's been a friend of the Remys since they were all very young. But Simon is himself. If he'd been a true ally, an auxiliary, our group would put itself out for him, whether there was a chance of success—" He stopped. "No. Maybe not. That's my own quixotic impulse. The Usaians always weigh their chances of success. Or at least they did when Nat was arrested—even though he's one of their own. This is why they've survived so long. But I can't even take the case to council. I don't know how aware you are of what brought this about, but Simon was trying to manipulate things at a vulnerable moment, and he fell on his face. If someone is shot while trying to steal something, you can't really say that others have an obligation to risk themselves to save his life." He must have read my confusion. He shook his head. "No, I don't propose to explain," he said. "It would take too long and some of it I can't tell you because I got it in confidential reports from Liberte. But let's say that Simon was playing with fire, before he got burned."

"Aren't you all playing with fire, though?" I asked. "Isn't that the definition of a revolution?"

For a moment he looked like he couldn't believe I'd say something so incredibly stupid. Maybe it was even true. Maybe I had violated good sense. It's impossible to know in a different world. There are different ways; different expectations. He narrowed his eyes. "Not…in the way I mean."

"Do you mean that he failed to conform to your ideals?" I asked, as I thought I understood his hints. "But he's not of you. He's not a Usaian. How can you demand he conform to your ideals, before you assist him?"

I got the impression I'd upset him. "There are," he said, "ideals of human decency of—of being human, without which we revert to the rule of the Good Men. Or worse." He seemed about to say a lot more, but I got the impression he was holding himself back by an effort of will. "I can't help you, in any case. I couldn't help you even if Simon were more closely allied with our cause. The council would never permit it." He took a deep breath. "You're an old battle comrade. You've helped me and…and us…our cause,

in a very tight spot. I will extend you my hospitality as long as you wish it, and will help you find more permanent accommodation.

"As for Simon, he's become a matter for international bargaining and international maneuvering." He held up a hand before I could speak. "It's not that I don't want to help, understand me. It's that I can't. With all the best will in the world, I can't even plead for the council to send someone on a suicide mission to save him from the results of his own folly. He made himself head of a revolution that meant to make all men equals, knowing he could never be equal. Things were bound to leak, and things were bound to happen. He knew my identity is out in the open and that we broadcast. He helped us defeat controls on the broadcasts. Did he think the knowledge would never make it to Liberte?" He took a deep breath and seemed to draw himself into composure by an effort of will. "And now, please excuse me. I have work to do. I do not know if I'll be able to take time to eat, but I'll make sure you're served dinner. You are, of course, free to go where you please, but remember the house is a military installation, and refrain from making the guards nervous."

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Piracy Preferred

AND HE LEFT ME. STANDING ALONE IN THE MIDDLE OF HIS PERFECTLY DECORATED room, with its white carpet, its polished pine shelves, its low, cushiony seats, its broad glass doorway facing the sea, I tried to think of what to do next.

I didn't realize I was furious until I noticed the images forming at the back of my mind were of kicking my way out through that glass doorway to the terrace and—

And what? Plunging to the sea below? The idea made me smile, because it was so much the act of a romantic lover, and I wasn't one—certainly not Simon's. But what else could I do? Challenge Lucius to a fight? The thought came and for a moment there was a feeling of relief, because Lucius was definitely someone I could with impunity be furious at. If I lost control and attacked him, he'd probably stop me before I landed a single punch. He was as fast as I was, and as strong. No, stronger, because behind his enhanced capabilities were his not inconsiderable bulk and his not inconsiderable masculine advantage.

But then if I attacked him, I'd get no satisfaction either. And besides, what could I get him to do? Send a rescue party for Simon? He'd said he couldn't, and I remembered Simon telling me that when Nat was captured and condemned to death, the Usaians had refused to help. Lucius and one of Nat's sisters had gone in, and the young woman had died in the attempt. I remembered that story particularly because Simon had been affected by her death and seemed genuinely fond of her. He'd said she was like a little sister to him.

I took deep breaths. Lucius might have been unpleasant about Simon—had been unpleasant about Simon—in saying no, but he'd also said, and I had to believe it, that his "no" was more dictated by circumstances than by his dislike of Simon. And he had to know more about what had happened in Liberte than I did. Could I swear there was no reason at all for him to say

that Simon had brought this on himself? Could I even say that Simon's intentions had been good?

I realized I'd been clenching my fists so hard it hurt, and let go.

Granted that Simon was not the best person in the world, for whatever the definition of "good" might be. I knew that he was manipulative and deceived others and possibly himself, but I also knew how he'd come to it. Whoever had said to know all is to forgive all was a child and an idiot. I could understand most crimes without in the least thinking they were forgivable. But there was a point to it. Up to a point, if you could understand how someone had got twisted and turned inside, you had to forgive them, because—what else could you do?

In Simon's case I could see all too well how he'd gone astray—how desperate he'd been to survive. And from what I'd heard, from himself and from others, if a Good Man were taken down, it wouldn't just be him dying, but most of his retainers and dependents. It wasn't just sheer selfishness and desire to keep himself alive that led Simon to do what he did, to play the fool, to dissemble, to act—often—like saving his skin was the most important thing in the world.

I doubted that it had never occurred to him, Earth born and bred, that as large as this world was he could just have left Liberte, he'd have had plenty of places to hide. Perhaps—I thought—as spoiled as Simon was; as used to being in power and having everything he wanted, it would have seemed like dying for him to go away, perhaps, leave his power and privilege behind, and have to do more than sign forms for a living. On the other hand, considering how many years he'd lived with the dire threat to his life from the other Good Men, even Simon might have considered it a better option.

Then I realized if he'd gone into hiding, Liberte would have been taken over and all his retainers and servants destroyed.

Seen that way, it was almost altruistic for him to stay in Liberte and to pretend to be a fool and inoffensive.

If that was his motivation, then trying to control the revolution he knew was coming was the only thing he could have done.

I had no proof that Simon had ever done anything—much less that—for altruistic reasons. But I remembered his face, his screaming at Alexis to get me out of there. He could have found a way out. He could have

disappeared. Or he could have demanded Alexis defend him and die protecting him while he made an escape. Instead he'd chosen to see me safely away.

That action alone argued in favor of a man who had been trying to do the best he could for his dependents and those who couldn't survive without him.

And that meant—

And that meant, inescapably, that I couldn't leave him to die.

Even if I didn't really have a chance of saving him, I'd tried to get help, the sane thing to do. It hadn't worked. Only the insane thing remained. I had to do it alone.

I didn't like the conclusion. I didn't want to go back to Liberte. Lucius Keeva had said it would be suicide, and there was a very good chance he was right. I remembered those heads on poles. Once madness sets in and crowds are out for blood, a place won't be safe until sanity is restored, and judging from historical reports of such events, that could be years. Or decades.

The French Revolution wasn't the model for this. The Turmoils were. They'd taken almost twenty years to burn themselves out.

And they'd only really stopped the insane killings when the Mules themselves, experienced and trained at crowd control, had taken over under a new guise again.

They'd gone on long after the mobs had killed every bioimproved person that could be easily spotted and onto killing anyone who was a little too beautiful, a little too fast, a little too smart, though not smart enough to hide it.

But Simon had been captured, and if Lucius—and Alexis—were right, then he'd be used as a bargaining chip in a power game. But bargaining chip or not, he was going to end up dead.

Right.

I realized that as satisfying as kicking out the plate glass—if it wasn't transparent dimatough—window of Lucius Keeva's room might be, the thing to do was to get out of here as quietly and as quickly as I could, and to find my way back to Liberte.

Fortunately, Lucius had left that option open by telling me I could go anywhere I wished in the house, provided I didn't upset the guards.

I went back to the bedroom and found my slippers, and put them on my bare feet. They were the dance slippers I'd worn to the ball. Immensely impractical, but better than nothing. Then I tried to think through what I'd need.

Money. That was the first thing. I'd need cred gems. Preferably unmarked credgems. And I'd need weapons, and I'd need—I sighed—to get a lot of awful hair dye again and perhaps a dress even more awful than the pink one.

I had nothing to sell. Robbing Keeva seemed foolhardy, and at any rate what, other than his liquor, could bring any substantial money?

I eyed the cut-crystal decanters with their mysterious contents, and then told myself it was stupid. I had no idea what liquor was good, or even expensive, on Earth.

Then I thought that Simon had opened an account for me. Not much—at least not by his reckoning—but enough to get me immediate necessities or little luxuries if I went out shopping alone.

I'd never gone shopping alone. Unlike most women, I'd never understood the purpose of shopping for its own sake, and he insisted on giving me things before I'd even expressed an interest in them.

But I remembered there was an account with the main bank of Liberte—Finance de Liberte—and that it was coded to my genetic print.

I wondered if the revolutionaries had taken over banks. I didn't think so. Not yet. They were still very much in the phase of breaking things and killing people, and I doubted they'd thought of more sophisticated things, like hacking into bank accounts.

So, I needed to find a bank.

I headed out of Keeva's lodgings, in the sort of purposeful walk that makes people assume you know what you're doing. Which, of course, is particularly important if you don't.

I wandered purposefully down three consecutive corridors, until I glimpsed what looked like daylight. At which point I collared the impeccably uniformed and very young man guarding the doorway and said, "Pardon me, could you tell me the way to the nearest bank?"

He blinked at me, in utter confusion. Then gulped and turned very red. This might have been the effect of interacting with a woman, or at least with a woman outside of an official framework. Or it might have been that

he wasn’t good at personal interaction with any human being. He swallowed hard and said, “Down the street. Turn right at the clock. It’s the first building on the right.”

I thanked him and wandered down the street, with my hands in the pockets of my borrowed outfit, trying to look casual and at home. It came home to me that my looks were a real problem. Men stared at me. The more subtle of them tried not to gawk directly or at least not to stare. But the younger just looked. Women looked too, often with some malice.

The men and women all seemed to be in some form of uniform, which might be the other reason they stared at me: because I wasn’t. Also, I started wondering about something else. I’d noticed in my time in Liberte, and when interacting with people from Olympus and other seacities or territories, that they all had slightly different gestures, slightly different ways of standing, slightly different ways of holding themselves up. Which is to say, they would have stuck out as different, as strangers in Eden. I remembered when I’d first met Kit’s wife, who’d been raised on Earth, and how odd her every gesture, her way of moving seemed.

Eden is a small place. Sure, some professions—my own old profession as a navigator of darkships, for instance—had their own slang, and their own way of behaving. But that was conscious and by choice, and not something you learned from birth to identify as the normal way to do things.

I started worrying long before I reached the bank. If I stuck out like a sore thumb everywhere I went, would there be any point in going back to Liberte? They could identify me, track me, arrest me, kill me or use me as a hostage.

In the back of my mind, I heard Lucius say “It’s a suicide mission.” I didn’t want to commit suicide. For one, my committing suicide would not help Simon. I needed to go in, fit in, bring him out.

Right then and there it seemed impossible.

The coward in me—and I’m not really a coward, I think, but there is a coward in my mind, one who tries to convince me to take the easy way every time—whispered that I should just stay here and let Liberte take care of itself. After all, I’d escaped with my life.

But it was not that easy. Year after year, I’d wonder if I could have saved Simon, and feel like I should have. It was no use telling myself it

would have done no good. If I didn’t try it, I couldn’t be sure.

Like that, I was standing in front of the bank. It had never occurred to me to fear that it might be one with employees, because the only bank I’d seen was the one where Simon had taken me, when he’d established my account. And I wasn’t even sure if it normally had human employees, or if it was an exception made for him.

In any case, I must have feared it at the back of my mind, because I felt perceptible relief when I entered the swinging glass doors and found myself in a broad, polished white ceramite lobby, surrounded by row upon row of teller booths.

This was one step up from the place where you either pushed in your thumb or your credgem. The booths were usually controlled, ten to one operator, which meant they could handle more complex operations than simply withdrawing or depositing credits.

A lucky break since it had just occurred to me I needed to do some fancy financial work. If I didn’t, if I left my money in an account in Liberte, then sooner or later the revolutionaries would find a way to breach the accounts. It was an unfailing habit of revolutionaries to take the property of those they deemed had offended them. If Lucius Keeva was telling the truth, even the Usaians had taken most of his home for their headquarters.

I let that thought go, as right then the Usaian movement was the least of my concerns. Instead, I advanced to the nearest empty booth, and closed the door behind me. I checked that the door opened several times before closing it and locking it.

It was one thing to lock myself in a small room of my own volition; another and completely different to allow someone else to lock me in. One of them was unpleasant, the other was crazy-making. In fact, part of the reason I had decided to stay on Earth had been that. I couldn’t stand the idea of being locked in a vehicle, alone, stranded months’ travel away from the nearest source of help. It had been fine before. But now I was aware of what it might mean.

And besides, I was tired of the ever-perpetual pressure to remarry—what good was it? Navigators married pilots. I knew every one of the single cats between my class and the current one, and I didn’t want to marry any of them. None of them would, as Len had, be able to look past my peculiarities, at my real self. If they even knew of my peculiarities. And I

didn’t feel like explaining to anyone else that, yes, I was different. For one, you never knew how people would react. Look at my foster parents, who had never gotten over what I was.

So I’d had my choice between being locked in a small space with someone or alone, but it was still locked, and still away from all help, medical or otherwise.

And, yes, I do have issues that have come home carrying issues in arms. Why else would anyone run away from home to an entirely new planet?

I checked the lock on the booth door again, found it opened when I pushed it, and decided to sit down. The booth had controls, automatic, which turned on a holo of the operator, and allowed the operator to see me. I looked at the panel in front of me, for a moment, and realized that any attempt at accessing my account and getting anonymous gems off the machine would show my face to someone at the other end.

There are times when my enhancements are useful. Beyond just being Jarl Ingemar’s clone, I had another bioengineered advantage. The world in which I’d been born enhanced those they intended as pilots or navigators of energy-collecting darkships, so that the team—I wondered when the tradition of their being married had come in—had a good chance of coming back alive.

Pilots—my late husband as well as my “brother” Kit—were enhanced with eyes that allowed them to see in the dark and which gave them the nickname of “cats,” and navigators, like myself, were designed with… mechanical intuition. Electronic intuition too. There were few machines I couldn’t understand after a look. I had sense of direction, and a superhuman memory too, but right then what I needed was the mechanical ability.

I lifted the panel on the machine, gingerly, lest an alarm should sound. Found the anti-vandalism alarm as, by instinct and some knowledge of similar mechanisms, I lifted the lid of the machine and disabled it with my little finger slipped beneath the panel, then lifted the panel fully, braced should another alarm ring, and should I be trapped in here. I had my story all ready, should that happen. I’d tell them I thought the machine malfunctioned, and I was trying to fix it. It’s amazing what people will believe when said by a young woman who has mastered the art of looking innocent, or even a close approximation, as I had.

But no alarms sounded, and I supposed it was because no money transfers could take place from this machine without the intervention of the human operator, so even if you managed to break into the machine and sabotage it, you'd gain nothing.

At any rate, I didn't want to sabotage it. I just wanted to confuse it, enough that anyone operating the machine wouldn't be able to give an accurate description of my features to anyone asking. Look, I wasn't doing anything illegal. The money had been given to me, and it was in an account in my name, but I suspected there was more communication between Olympus and Liberte than anyone on either side would like to admit to, and when I got my money out and changed it to a portable, unidentifiable format, I didn't want word to go ahead of me to Liberte to warn them to look out for a redhead who looked thus and so. Not the least because most people would recognize me on description.

So I tampered with the visual intake circuits just enough that the picture would waver and flicker and tremble, more or less constantly.

Which was why when I reassembled the machine and turned it on, and the holo of a rather plain young woman, with scraped back dark hair and wearing a tunic as nondescript and grayish as mine floated in front of me, the first words out of her mouth were, "I'm sorry, the picture is not very clear. Can you move to another booth, please?"

"No."

"No?"

"No, I don't wish to move to another booth," I said.

There was a silence, and she looked like she would like to ask me why not, but instead, what she said was, "We like to have visual verification to protect your account integrity."

"You have a genlock for verification," I said.

The holo of the supervisor wagged its head, then looked away. I got the impression she was consulting something. "But why wouldn't you wish for—"

"I'm comfortable in this booth, and I don't wish to change," I said, and infused my voice with that tone of *I'm being unreasonable and prepared to make your life difficult* that is the nightmare of anyone in a service position.

There was a long pause, then she said, "Very well. Is your account with us?"

I said no, and gave her the code for the bank in Liberte. I could have given her the name, but it was less likely she would remember what and where it was by the code, and I'd memorized the code, in case I ever needed to draw money elsewhere. Then I put my finger in the genlock, let it read it.

"Where would you like the money transferred and how much?" she asked.

"I would like it in to-go unmarked credigems," I said. Simon had introduced me to these, and even given me a few, with instructions that I was to use them whenever I didn't want the whole world to know about my purchases, since all the other records were tracked.

There was a silence. "We'd prefer to transfer it to an account in our bank," she said. "We can offer you very competitive rates in—"

I repeated my request for pay-to-the-bearer gems. The hologram of the representative didn't sigh, but gave the impression she wanted to; however presently, the little chute atop the machine ejected three glittering gems, while a slit in the machine spit out a receipt telling me the account in Liberte was now closed.

The hologram of the bank employee vanished with the suddenness of something turned off, and I opened the door to the booth and walked out.

Slipping the gems into the pocket of my pants, I started making a mental list of what I needed and where I could find it.

One thing was sure, either on Earth or in Eden. I wasn't going to find the cheapest prices in the brightly lit streets, with the beautiful buildings and the shining shops. And I'd learned something about seacities, too. In seacities, the lower levels correlated with the cheaper properties and the less expensive shops.

I ambled to an area where there were stairs down, then took them. I needed a broomer suit, not expensive but good, because I intended to fly at high altitude and fast, and the cheaper suits might not be well insulated enough to prevent my losing appendages. I probably had enough money for a flyer, but it seemed to me that if I took one, I'd be painting a huge target on myself. Much easier to see a flyer land. A broom could take advantage of any little bit of beach, or even, for that matter, go underwater, if needed.

What I was wearing would do for under the suit. I was still a little worried about sticking out, or being memorable, but assumed I'd pass more easily in my present clothes than if I had been properly attired and—

And I careened into someone, stepped back, started to apologize, and stopped. Something about her—not very clear, but remembered, sparked my memory. She didn't look like anyone I knew, but there was something to the way she narrowed her eyes, to her expression that was familiar. Her eyes too were familiar. Very dark and intent.

It clicked suddenly and I remembered I had met her, but in passing. She was Martha Remy, Nat Remy's twin sister, a head shorter than he was and with mousy brown hair instead of his pale blond crop, but the eyes were the same.

I had a moment of confusion, the unreasonable feeling that I was "caught," and then I stopped myself taking a deep breath, and told myself I wasn't doing anything wrong. I was an adult, with adult autonomy. Lucius Keeva might not want to render Simon assistance and help, but that didn't mean I was forbidden from doing it. It just meant that I was on my own.

So I smiled graciously—a thing I'd learned to do from-the-lips-out in all sorts of embarrassing situations with people who expected me to know how to behave on Earth—and said, "I beg your pardon," as I started to walk around her.

She grabbed my wrist. I just stopped myself from breaking her arm. In Eden you don't grab strangers, you just don't. And if you attempt to do it, you might find your arm broken or worse, you might find yourself taken to a traditional court for compensation. Sure, among family or friends there's touching, but you simply don't physically restrain someone you've barely been introduced to. And I was faster, stronger. Which is why I didn't break her arm. You didn't hurt normal people. I'd learned that early enough.

My checking of my own movement must have been noticeable because she took a little step back, startled. "You must let me talk to you," she said. It was all in a rush, as though it came out impelled by some violent emotion. "You must. Luce is going to send you in there and—"

"The Good—Lieutenant Colonel Keeva is not sending me anywhere," I said. "He has told me he'll give what help he can, but in fact he can give no help, so I'm free to stay and will be sheltered but there's no help for Simon."

She stomped her foot, hard. "That," she said, "is just what I mean. He's sending you in there with no help at all, and you can't go. You just

can’t. If you do, you’ll end up dead, and Simon will end up dead and it won’t do anyone any good.”

I stared at her. “Something wrong with your hearing?” I asked. I rarely allowed myself to be rude. It’s an expensive luxury. But talking to Martha Remy was like howling at a hurricane. “He’s not sending me anywhere. He’s not interested. I can please myself and do what I wish.”

She narrowed her eyes, but not at me, more like she was trying to sort through something. My rudeness glanced off her as though she had an invisible shield. “That’s how he’d do it. Luce, I mean. Oh, I don’t want you to think badly of him. I rather like him, in a way, which is good since I think he’s permanently attached to our family through Nat—but that’s how he does things. He no longer has any power, objectively. He never had any power, in a way, because before his father died, he had none, but the thing is, he’s learned to get people to do what he wants. He wants you to go to Liberte and rescue Simon. And he doesn’t want his fingerprints on it. But he’s being so clever that he’s stupid, because you’d just get killed.”

“That’s exactly what he said,” I said. “That it would be suicide.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “He would. But I don’t think he realized that he was exactly right. He’s not, you see, very worldly. Not really. You can’t be when your entire life was artificial, and you spent fourteen years away from all human beings.” She rubbed her fist under her nose, in a reflexive gesture that looked like something a young child would do. “He wouldn’t realize how you stick out, how odd you are.”

“Beg your pardon?” I asked, wondering if she were paying me back with rudeness for rudeness.

She looked at me, but I still got the impression she wasn’t seeing me. Not as Zen Sienna, not as a person she was talking to, but as a problem, a cipher, something to be calculated and weighed. “How could you not be?” she said. “You’re not from here. And you stick out all over.” She sighed, and seemed to focus on me, really focus on me for the first time. “Are you determined to go and rescue Simon, one way or another?”

“Yes,” I said. “I think I have to.” This was not the place to explain to her how I’d been raised with the idea that I owed normal humans service, nor the load of unspoken guilt in my mind because I couldn’t save the one normal human who meant the most to me. Len had trusted me, and all I

could give him was death. I was not going to have another death on my conscience.

This time she was looking at me, looking into my eyes, evaluating me. She sighed. “Well, then,” she said. “You’re going to need Royce.”

“Who?”

“Royce Allard,” she said. “You’ll see.”

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And Now You Don’t

I SAW. IT STARTED, LIKE ALL ADVENTURES, IN A STEALTHY AND CONVOLUTED WAY. We went back to what had once been the Good Man’s palace, but Martha didn’t approach it the normal way. Or, frankly, in any sane way. She seemed to think it was very important to get in without anyone seeing us, even though she had a job within the building and I was a guest there.

“No, you see,” she said. “If they know we went in, they’ll track us, and figure out where we went. And while Lucius wouldn’t want you to die in Liberte any more than I do, any more than I want Simon to die, it’s very important that he be able to deny that he gave you any help, much less allowed you to get help from our expert in disguise and makeup.”

“Expert in disguise?”

“Yes,” she said. “What else? Oh, he would hate it if he heard himself referred to that way. He has a fancy title, something about tactical deception and infiltration, and yeah, what he does is way more than physical disguise. You’re going to need way more than physical disguise. But yeah, that’s what it comes to.” We were walking up a steep, winding street, towards the palace. To be precise, towards the back of the palace. I trusted her, because you have to trust someone, but I thought the whole idea was a little mad. No, a lot mad. It would be the equivalent of breaking into your own living room. “Royce is a Usaian, a convert, and a civilian contractor with the armed forces of Olympus. He is under the purview of the Daughters of Liberty, which are, roughly, under Luce’s control. If we use Royce’s services, it must be without Luce knowing it.”

And now we were on a beach, and I was wondering exactly why, and what this had to do with going to the palace. It was a very pretty beach, with golden sand, probably imported and set on the black dimatough frame of the seacity.

If I hadn’t known that the seacity was artificially built, grown on a poured dimatough frame, I’d have thought it was natural. Of course, the

seacity had been built more than two hundred years ago, and it would have been at the mercy of natural forces ever since. This was a little beach, with golden sand extending to the ocean, a few boulders—real or artificial, I couldn't tell—and, to the inland side, a growth of shrubs and trees near the rising black wall of a cliff that formed the structural support for the rising tiers of the rest of the seacity.

Martha plunged doggedly into a cluster of bushes, and it took me a moment to realize that she was doing it carefully, too, so as not to bend or break any of the branches, not to tear any of the leaves. I followed her, imitating her as best possible. She punched a part of the black wall that looked like every other part of the black wall, and then did something. There was a dancing of fingers on the dimatough, as though it were a screen and she were entering a complex code. I couldn't see anything, and the movements were so intricate, it would take a long time learn, I thought.

Part of the cliff slid away. She reached back, without looking, grabbed me by the arm, and pulled me in. I don't like being touched by strangers. I *really* don't like being touched by strangers. I ground my teeth together and endured.

She pulled me into a tunnel of sorts, as the unconventional door we'd used closed behind us. It was a tunnel, but it looked far more like the corridor inside a well-appointed home. The floor was some sort of tile, the walls and ceiling were off-white ceramite, and there was diffuse light from somewhere.

"Where?" I said.

"It leads to the palace," she said. "To Luce's room." She looked over her shoulder. "It's a great secret, and I only reveal it to you because I know you'd never—Because I trust you. It would be easy—"

It would be easy to send an assassin. Which meant that either Martha Remy was out of her ever-loving mind to be showing it to someone who would shortly be going into a place where she might be subjected to torture; or that Lucius Keeva was not as important to their war effort as one would assume. And then I started wondering if Lucius had told her to do this. It seemed unlikely, I thought, that she would dare reveal a secret of this importance, one that could lead to a neat assassination job, without his permission. It felt wrong.

This is how paranoid you could become when everyone was playing secrecy games. I started wondering if I was crazy or they were.

At the end of the tunnel there was another code typed on an invisible screen. It made me realize you'd have to have your hand just so, and in just the right place. I wondered what would happen if you were slightly off, and had a strong feeling it was the sort of thing I didn't want to know, not really.

"It's not as unsafe as it seems," she said. "If more than two people are detected in here, and if at least one of them isn't familiar to the surveillance AI, everything will lock, both sides, and Luce will know."

"Surveillance," I said. "Won't there be recordings?"

She shook her head. "No recordings. Only an automated system. In the same way," she said, in a low voice, as the door started to slide open, "this door won't open if there's anyone but Luce in there."

"But Luce—"

"He won't be there," she said, and once more I wondered exactly what he knew, what she knew, and if they'd arranged all this together.

We left the hallway for a large, white-carpeted bedroom, furnished in polished pine furniture. It looked much like the guest room where I'd changed after showering, but the bed was larger. Then again, Lucius Keeva was a large man.

There is something intrusive, I think, about seeing the bedroom of someone you're not intimate with. Bedrooms are so much a part of a person, a place where you remove your clothes, where you are yourself, and safe from intrusion from the world outside. There's always something, in anyone's bedroom, that will surprise those who don't know him very well.

In Lucius Dante Maximillian Keeva's room, it was the stuffed giraffe. I'd met the man, I'd heard his history, I'd even seen him in action as part of an expedition to commandeer a strategic asset. The last thing I expected of Lucius was that he would sleep with a stuffed giraffe. And yet, there it sat, three feet high from chest to head, with a too-happy smile on its face, looking out at the world with shining glass eyes.

Martha saw me staring. I couldn't help staring. I thought she was going to explain the giraffe, but then she shrugged, as though thinking that no explanation would be enough.

To this day I have no idea why Lucius Keeva has a giraffe on his bed. And I don't intend to ask.

We crossed the bedroom, and then she got cautious. We went out of the bedroom, turned a sharp right, went through what looked like a closet, then up stairs that had a distinct “maintenance area” look and down another set of stairs, then through another closet, and into a different hallway. Every step of the way she looked out before we emerged, to make sure no one was around.

Not only didn’t we come across any guards, we didn’t come across anyone, until Martha knocked at a door at the end of a hallway lined with shelves piled with anonymous boxes.

From the other side, a voice said, “Yes.”

She opened the door, stuck her head in and said something. The voice that answered her spoke too low for me to understand the words, but it reminded me of Simon’s voice. Not in timbre or tone, but in some indefinable way. Indefinable, that is, until I met Royce Allard.

Martha led me into a room that looked like a laboratory’s offspring by a styling parlor. There were machines and screens, mirrors and vials, and then there were chairs, set in front of what were clearly vanities of some sort, if vanities were really serious and high tech.

Royce—introduced that way by Martha—was a large man, built on the mold of Lucius or Alexis. He had blunt features, a shock of reddish-brown hair, arms that looked like he lifted weights at his job every day, and eyes like a shrewd monkey. Which might sound unkind, but isn’t. Just like the eyes of a monkey can look out of place, staring out of incongruous features, so too Royce Allard’s eyes looked incongruous, much too bright and intent for his blunt features. He looked at me, and his eyebrows went up a little. Then his hands went to the side of his waist, and then he spoke and I understood why he reminded me of Simon. He had the same accent, which wasn’t quite like a French accent in historic casts, but was close enough. “You want her to pass unnoticed in Liberte?” he asked Martha, and sighed. “Wouldn’t you want me to do something easier, like, say, hide a full-grown elephant in my armpit?”

I frowned. “I’m not an elephant,” I said. One thing is not to wish to take offense, and another to remain quiet while people around you are acting like mental patients.

He smiled. “Indeed not. And that’s the problem. Most people, male or female, will see you and remember you.” He shrugged. “Well! This will be

a challenge. I always hear it's important to have a challenge, so one doesn't grow stale. When I finish this work, I'll be so fresh I might as well be a beginner again."

He led me to a chair and sat me down. The work he did involved a lot of machines, both for measuring things and for changing things. I wish I could tell you precisely what he did, but the truth is, I couldn't even follow it. He worked silently, and all I can tell you is that at some point semi-permanent caps went on my teeth, which changed their shape, and that something of the same sort went inside my cheeks, which changed the shape of my mouth and my features. And yet, none of it was permanent, and none of it felt any different once it was in.

All right, maybe the teeth. I kept getting the persistent and unshakeable feeling that my teeth were too long for my mouth, but I couldn't tell which parts of them were different.

My eye color was changed too. Not lenses. There was something injected. There was something injected at various portions of the procedure into various parts of my features, and I can't tell you exactly where or what it did.

At one point I asked if the makeup would survive bathing, and Royce shook his head, which alarmed me, but then he said, "Not makeup, as such, understand. It is subcutaneous. It will be absorbed, in a couple of weeks. Earlier if I remove it. But until then, you are completely safe in your new appearance, safe through immersion and baths, and exposure to sun and anything. Your new appearance is your new appearance, impervious to all the things your normal appearance is."

When it was all done, he stood me in front of the mirror. I still looked like myself, though my hair was a reddish shade of brown, and my features were…

It's hard to explain. They hadn't so much changed as been made unmemorable. The changes were small, save for the coloration—both my skin and my eyebrows and eyelashes were darker, and my eyes were now brown—but I no longer looked like Boticelli's Venus. I looked similar enough that someone would say "Oh, you remind me of," if he were very well educated and had spent a lot of time staring at me. Still, I didn't look like I'd been made to order.

The point was that no one, male or female, would spend a lot of time staring at me. I looked like someone who could pass unnoticed in the street. I'd have passed myself on the street without noticing.

"The important thing," Royce said, "and the difficult one is to change the way you move."

I turned around and the stranger in the mirror turned around too, to face him. "The way I move? Why? Is that particularly memorable?"

He seemed to struggle for words. "Oh," he said. "Well…yes. Or rather, it's not memorable. No one is going to tell you he really likes or dislikes the way you move. It's just…odd."

"No one ever commented on it," I said, frowning at him.

He smiled. When he smiled, he looked like a different person, and a much nicer one. "No, I imagine not. No one would notice it in your world, because it would be the normal way to move, or at least close enough. And here, on Earth, everyone knows you're a stranger, so they would expect you to move and act like a stranger. But if you want to pass unnoticed, something will need to be done. People won't know what makes them notice you, or what makes them sure you're not from Liberte, but they will know—they will be able to have you followed and that's the difference between your surviving and not—potentially. And then there's the patois, but fortunately we have recordings for that."

"Recordings?"

"Neural recordings," he said. "Of the movements, too, but that's harder to upload."

"You're going to upload things to my brain?" I blinked at him. I was used to the science on Earth being behind what we did on Eden. There was a reason for it. They had outlawed most experimentation and research after the Turmoils. Supposedly they'd only outlawed new biological research, but in fact all sorts of technical research and even incidental discoveries had been hidden and never hit the public consciousness. The reason for it was that the Good Men had liked society stable. Nothing destabilizes society like new knowledge and new gadgets and new inventions. They'd sold themselves to the people of Earth as bringing stability. And they had. Three hundred years of stability. Even if it required stagnation and massive deaths by attrition and neglect.

But even on Eden we didn't have any way to access our neurons, bypassing the conscious act of learning to upload knowledge or training into the brain. "When I was in training," I told him, "I often wished that there were some way to just upload all the knowledge directly to the brain, without my having to work at it."

He chuckled. "Well, there isn't. This isn't it. It's not knowledge of that type. I can't use neural upload to teach you the multiplication tables, for example, but I can put it in your head so that if you're prompted to answer two times two, your lips will say four. Does that make sense? Consciously you won't know it, until you hear yourself say it. It is a lousy way to learn anything, because it will only apply in certain situations, and there will be no…control on your part. No…" he translated his verbal hesitation into a flourishing gesture midair with his right hand. "No way to use that knowledge, but the way that was imprinted. Also, it doesn't last. It used to be believed, back in the dark ages around the twenty-first century, that eventually this mode of learning would replace traditional learning, that people would buy knowledge packs, and have it uploaded to their minds, as though they were a sort of meat computer. But it doesn't work that way long term. Sure, if you absolutely need to speak a language for a week or so, we can upload some basic vocabulary, but you'll speak it with atrocious grammar, unless you respond with a learned sentence to another learned sentence. You'll be a clever parrot, not a real speaker of the language."

"But then, what good does it do me?" I asked. "I thought you'd said I'd have to speak the local patois."

"Well, *alors*," he said, sounding very much like Simon. "It is the local patois. By which I mean, it is mostly Glaish, with a local overlay. If we give you the vocabulary to understand the overlay, all we need to do on your part is give you an accent, when you answer. You don't need to speak the patois. Some people never do. Some people rarely. But you do need to understand it, and that's easy. It is a list of words. You'll understand the words when you hear them."

"And it will vanish from my mind?"

A quick smile. "Like Cinderella's dress, which is why this isn't used for long-term learning, for things people need. Well, it's not really used by anyone but the Usaian forces just now, but to the extent it could be used by everyone, after the revolution triumphs, and when science will be set free, it

still can’t be used for long-term learning. The brain returns to its normal state.”

“So…How long do I have?”

He shrugged. “A month. Two. Who knows? Each brain is different. So…expediency and speed, highly recommended, yes?”

I nodded doubtfully, while he led me to a chair, sat me down on it, and put something that looked like a knit silver hat on me. Then he turned on an apparatus.

I can’t describe what followed, any more than I can describe the contents of a dream after waking. It partook that same nature of a dream, or at least of what one remembers of a dream once one awakes. Images and faces and sounds seemed to come out of somewhere, suddenly, with no preparation. Things happened. Most of them not physical things. Not things I could describe. At one point, there was a feeling of falling.

And then—he was removing the helmet. I stood up. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of a stranger before turning around to look and realizing it was a mirror. The stranger in the mirror turned, too, and stared at me with brown eyes.

“Not bad, is it?” Royce Allard said, a hint of pride in his voice. “You will do. You will pass.”

“Certainly I will pass,” I said. And then I realized I’d said it with an accent like Simon’s. And that Allard had spoken in a language that included at least two French words, and one whose provenance I couldn’t identify.

I blinked at him, and he chuckled. “It will do,” he said. “It is better than I thought I could do without a staff. And now, we should get you something to wear and your equipment, because if you leave soon, you should be able to approach Liberte in the dark of night. This will not help you against military defenses, but it’s not the military you should be afraid of.”

“The Sans Culottes are the military, aren’t they?” I said.

He shook his head. “Some of them. Some of them are trained and might rise to that description, but most of them, really, are just…a barely trained rabble. Certainly not well equipped. But even so, I think your greatest danger, in Liberte proper, is from people rendered hysterical by fear.”

“Fear of what?” I asked.

We were standing in the middle of his laboratorylike beauty parlor. I stood in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror, and saw him reflected in the glass behind me. Taller than I. Probably around forty years old, with his reddish brown hair starting to recede and at this point in time doing nothing more than giving the impression he had an abnormally tall forehead. His clever-monkey eyes looked at me in the mirror. “I was a Sans Culottes once, you know. Then there was…a moment, an experience.” He seemed to be weighing what and how much to tell me. His eyes narrowed. “I was raised as a Sans Culottes, you understand. Just like Martha,” he gestured towards her, and I realized she was still there. She’d been so quiet through the whole procedure that I’d forgotten her, or as near it as it was possible. “Just like Martha was raised Usaian. You don’t question it. I had training, and times of practicing for the revolution. And then, one day, while out with a group of young partisans like me, they found out something…different about me. The results were not pleasant. I was brought before the authorities on the principle that I was not equal. I did not wish to be equal. I was not trying to submerge myself to the whole, to be a good member of the unit. At the time, I had a friend who was Usaian, from one of the devout families. I…ah… converted, and eventually moved to Olympus to carry on my daylight occupation as a clothing designer.”

Beyond his hesitations, I could feel the lacunae in what he told, but I was momentarily diverted from wondering by the idea that someone who looked like he should carry stones for a living had made a living designing dresses—presumably—for fashionable women.

“That is the culture of the Sans Culottes,” he said. “And there are a lot of them in all French-speaking territories. They want to be equal. Really equal. Which is a good thing to aim for if you can, I suppose, but it means that sometimes you can’t be equal. Like Simon can’t be equal. And now that it’s been revealed that there are people among them who can’t be made equal, they will be afraid. Afraid, more than anything,” he said, “of the brittleness of their beliefs. The Good Men ruled for centuries, you see, on the understanding that they were superior. Denying that and destroying that belief was part of what the Sans Culottes were about. But then, when it’s revealed they really are superior, superior at a physical and mental level… Well! What is to stop people from binding themselves in subjection to these people once more; from wanting to be taken care of?”

“But,” I said. “Just because you’re faster or stronger, or even smarter, it doesn’t mean you make a better ruler.” I thought back to the man from whose genes I’d been built. By all accounts, he was faster, stronger and smarter, not just than the normal run of humanity, but than his own kind. “The way the early Mules ruled was no recommendation.”

“Yes,” he said. “But you’re talking reality.” His eyes looked grave in the mirror. “That’s not what we’re dealing in, you understand. My entire work, the daylight one, and the hidden one, requires me to be aware of what people think and believe that is not openly mentioned or openly spoken of. Humanity will undoubtedly always believe that someone very smart—smarter than they think they can hope to be, someone born endowed with gifts they can’t have, can only have one of two purposes towards them: to protect them or to harm them. And they in turn just want such people to go away. Those who are liberty-inclined because they fear that other people will submit to the superior men and the other people because, having endured the tyrannical rule of those people, they’re afraid of being subjected to it again, and being too weak to throw it off once more. The only way they can feel free is to kill those people; to make them stop existing and as if they’d never existed.”

“But I am one of those people,” I said.

His eyes went very serious. He’d been talking to me, somewhat in the way an adult speaks with a child, with the same assumption of amusement in his eyes and voice. But now his eyes went very serious, and he looked at me with a mix of something that might be worry or perhaps pity. “I know,” he said.

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Against the Fall of Night

THEY'D EQUIPPED ME, AS WELL AS THEY COULD. I HAD A SUIT THAT WAS ADEQUATE, and, for broomback wear, a padded broomer suit, much, much better than what Alexis had procured for us. Which was good, because I had to fly long distance across the ocean on a broom of the tiny sort, that could be clipped on a belt, and had no saddle or other comforts.

The clothes were all treated in such a way that they would dry very quickly if wet, would repel dirt, would not weigh me down unduly.

They tried to prepare me for all sorts of eventualities. My boots were equally supple and likely to stay dry, and infinitely more sturdy than the palace slippers I'd been wearing.

They also gave me a first aid kit that fit in an envelope, a special pouch to carry my currency under my clothes in such a way that I could not be pickpocketed and weapons. A couple of good knives, two burners that, like the suits, would take anything short of being set on fire, and I wasn't sure about that.

And then Martha had seen me off, to an area from which I could take off without being noticed. She'd grabbed my arm again—it was a habit—and looked up at me and said, "I wish I could go with you," she said. "I'd feel more confident that you would survive this, if I could. But Luce would have my hide."

"How much does he really know of all this?" I asked.

She smiled a little. "Nothing, of course. He's supposed to know nothing. He can't be involved. But if I weren't here, it would be noticed, and he would have to know something. He'd never forgive me."

"I see," I said, though I didn't. It seemed to me there were more games being played than I was prepared to even understand, much less participate in. One advantage of having been raised as something apart from normal humans was that I'd never been involved in the sort of politics human

friendships seemed to demand. Even in the small group of bioengineered pilots and navigators of the darkships, I'd stayed aloof from power plays, from guilt-inducement, from demands on me. The downside was that I'd also never experienced friendship. Love, surely, with Len, but Len was different.

Martha sighed. "It's very difficult," she said. "It's almost impossible to balance the demands of our debt and our relationship to Simon, and the demands to our people and to those who have pledged themselves to our side of the revolution. We can't put those fighting on our side in unnecessary danger. But then neither can we let Simon simply die." She looked up at me, her intent and intense look reminding me of her twin, whom most people were scared of. "So we must count on you. You're all we have. It's a long shot, but perhaps you can do it. Perhaps you can bring Simon back alive."

"I will try," I said, feeling more doubtful of it than I had before.

She nodded, and clasped my arm for a moment. "Good luck."

And then I'd flown off. I could remember the way. It is one of the things that was enhanced in me, beyond my genetic origins. Navigators, in Eden, were endowed with a sense of direction and a feeling for repairing machinery—not knowledge of it, precisely, possibly because, as Royce said, no one had figured out how to do that, and more likely, because technology could change in the twenty or thirty years a navigator operated, and if you created people for a certain technology, they wouldn't be able to adapt. Instead, we were given the natural talents that would make it easy for us to understand and repair machinery, with very little preparation: a look at it, a tale about how it worked.

So I knew my way to Liberte. And I'd been given some of the intelligence that Olympus had: a notion of what was going on; an idea of what and whom to avoid. It wasn't very reliable because, as Martha had told me, it would change from moment to moment. I was to avoid someone named Dechausse, someone referred to as Madame, and I was to stay away from certain areas.

What was going on was, in a word, chaos. It was not clear whether anyone had seized leadership of the mob yet. It was unlikely from what they knew that anyone had. The mob—or rather mobs, several of them, running rampant through the city—didn't seem to be pursuing any unified

objective or even to have any unified ideology, beyond ridding the world of anyone who might possibly be genetically enhanced.

My first mission was to avoid anyone who might be preventing outsiders coming in. This wasn't exactly as difficult as might be believed. Most people at the moment couldn't be paid enough to come into Liberte seacity. Even the few stories I'd heard in the public cast at Olympus, while eating a hasty dinner, had spoken of people killed, heads on stakes, general mayhem and torture, with the psychopaths that exist everywhere and everywhen in control of the situation and running the show.

Liberte was worried about people coming in, taking over, and stopping their revolution. They neither worried about nor organized against a single individual on a broom. What they feared was armies. The armies of the Good Men; the forces from other seacities; organized fighting men.

I might be organized, but I was a single woman, and no one would be on the lookout for me. At least, not unless I triggered their feeling that I was in some way enhanced.

So I had to land without being seen. I had to move about the seacity without arousing suspicion. And then I had to find where Simon was kept, and somehow to free him and leave the seacity with him. This involved finding out who was in control, to the extent that there was some control.

Look, I said it was chaos and it was, and the way most people were experiencing the revolution would be clashing crowds of people fighting back and forth and looting. It was the disorganization of a society that had lived for centuries under a repressive order and which had now been allowed to slip its bonds.

Without an overarching authority, without their guardians which had always prevented them from doing anything illegal or even rude, the people were doing what they very well pleased and came into their heads. Or a small number of them were, and the others were locked in their houses, possibly praying the confusion would pass them by.

But from what Martha had told me, there had to be others who were organized and someone in control of them. Probably someone left over from the old Sans Culottes hierarchy. There had to be someone in control because Simon had been taken and was held, something that would be impossible in mere chaos.

If the unorganized mob had captured him, he'd have been beheaded. Or if he escaped that fate, he'd also have escaped altogether. For him to be a prisoner, there had to be an organized enough force to keep him, an organized enough force to have a leader.

Who that leader was, and what that force looked like, or how many men strong, we didn't know and couldn't know. Not until I got to Liberte and looked around.

They'd told me he was kept in a prison beneath the palace, where apparently the Good Men—or, since they'd all been one man, whose brain periodically got transplanted to younger clones, perhaps it's more appropriate to say the Good Man, St. Cyr—had kept secret prisoners for centuries. It was near impregnable and probably very well guarded. The Good Man was an asset not to let go lightly and the people in charge were smart enough to remain both invisible and in control.

They probably expected an attack on the prison and were prepared to defend it.

No one had given me instructions on how to breach that prison. No one had given me instructions on how to free Simon. I suspected they didn't know how. At any rate, I didn't know how either. My general plan was to find my way there, to free him, and then—somehow—to find my way out again.

Details were vague because the circumstances would change. Really change, I guessed, depending on what I found on the ground.

My first view of the seacity made me afraid of what I would find. As we'd flown off, the palace had looked charred, but now it looked like the whole seacity was on fire. Fires glowed all over, like orange wounds in the dark blue-green of the seacity. Not bonfires, but blazes that engulfed buildings.

Closer in, I could hear sounds of singing and shouts, and screams, explosions, and the roaring of the fires. The whole place seemed to be awake and restless, animated by something between a party and a massacre.

I should have landed in one of the areas at the edge of the seacity, possibly in the lower levels, the sort of semi-peopled, darkened area like the beach from which Martha had opened the tunnel into Keeva's room. I should.

I’d had it in my mind to do just that: land somewhere away from human habitation and from any roaming murderous crowds.

And then I realized my subconscious had made a different decision. I flew closer to the center, looking for a place near the palace to land, a place that was relatively deserted. This forced me to hover over the heads of the crowd, just far enough away that I didn’t risk—too much—being seen. From the air what this revolution looked like was a looting party. I saw more people carrying as much as their arms allowed than people unburdened by possessions, or people actively hurting someone else.

But then it occurred to me to wonder if I was looking at looters or refugees. If the homes of the better-off citizens of Liberte had been broken into as the palace had, and they had time to escape, would they not leave, carrying what they could?

For whichever motive, the night was full of people running here and there, talking in whispers, carrying possessions in arms—as well as singing revolutionary songs, and attacking anyone who looked bioimproved.

The air over the seacity was relatively calm, possibly because of the habit of burning down anyone who tried to take off.

I got the impression of other brooms, one headed away from me, and one towards me, but they were too far away for me to even be sure of the impression, much less definite about who they were and where they were, and what they looked like.

And then I spotted a space. It was behind a burned structure, and it looked like whoever had been involved in the drama of destroying it had long gone. If there had been inhabitants of the place, who’d taken off in a hurry, they were far away. And whoever had set fire to it had long ago left, too, of necessity.

All that was left was a vast ruin, with a soaring front wall, made of dimatough, looking like a wing beating at the sky. There was a smell of burned building, which is not like the smell of burned anything else, containing, as it usually does, the scent of materials not meant to be burned. It felt acrid and unpleasant to the nose, and something crunched underfoot as I landed.

I clipped the broom—one of the little cylindrical models, with no saddle, and painful enough to ride across the ocean—to my belt, and crunched my way, cautiously, around the outside of the burnt walls. The

palace was above me, and I had two choices to get there. One was to go through the roads, and perhaps come across parties of people. Royce Allard had—he thought, and I hoped—made me unremarkable in a crowd, but it still might not be the brightest thing in the world, as an unescorted woman, to meet a party of people animated by looting and inspired by a sense of righteous envy of those better off.

Yeah, I am faster, stronger, smarter. One of the things you learn early on, when you're endowed with all of those attributes, but are also a woman, is not to lead those not as fast or as smart or as strong into temptation. You don't present yourself as a likely and easy target, because that will just cause them to attack you and get hurt.

Likely I could take on any small party of marauders and survive. But in the scale of things, mere looters seemed almost blameless, and fighting them a waste of my abilities. And besides, it would attract attention, and if it attracted attention, it could attract a larger group of people. Even my abilities were no match against a sufficiently large party.

So instead of going through the paths that led to the palace, I decided to take the route through Simon's vast, well-manicured lawns.

The strange thing is that they were still well manicured. If one managed not to smell the fire that had taken half the palace, or to look up at the desolate ruin, one would think, from the lawn alone, that nothing untoward had happened.

Here, while the seacity burned and people killed each other, or robbed armfuls of whatever they'd coveted, the lawn was soft, cool and deep underfoot, the trees were looming, dark and green and fragrant above, casting deeper shadows where the moonlight filtered through their branches. Here, small things ran scurrying in the undergrowth as I passed.

As I went around a tree, close to the shadow, my eyes and ears open to any sign that there were humans, hostile or not, nearby, a hand shot out and grabbed my upper arm.

I had a moment to think it was Martha, but the moment didn't last because the hand was larger and much stronger, and before I could turn to see who had grabbed me, he—had to be a he—had turned me around so that his arm went around my body, holding me fast, preventing me from moving, and his hand had covered my mouth, preventing any sound.

There is only one thing you can do in this situation, and I drew my head back, preparing to do it, preparing to hit out with my head at the nose and mouth of my captor. It's not ideal, mind you. You will feel concussed and a bit dizzy. But a man whose nose you've just shoved in with your head will be in no position to take advantage of that. At best, he'll have had his nose pushed into his brain case and will be dead. At worst, he'll be bleeding profusely and blinded by pain.

I'd judged this man to be taller than I. It's not one of those things you think about, it's one of those things you feel, from the relative position of his hands and mine. It would need a little jump to hit him in the face, but it could be done. Yes, even with him holding me. After all, I was faster and stronger than even the males of the species.

Making sure my plans weren't betrayed, not even by a sudden tenseness of muscles, I slammed my foot down into the ground, to propel me up, and threw my head back at the same time and—

And hit nothing, overbalancing. My captor had stepped back away from me, and now spun me around, all without letting go of my mouth, and letting go of my arm only as I was starting to fall, then grabbing my other arm, and saying, "Shh."

Dazed, I looked up and into the homely countenance of Alexis Brisbois.

He said again, "Shh." And then pulled me back with him into the shadow of a tree and put a hand across my middle, keeping me still. He'd let go of my mouth, and I wanted to speak, but before I could even figure out what to say, I heard approaching footsteps, and voices that weren't trying to be quiet at all.

The words were in the curious patois of Liberte, and I didn't understand them immediately, but the conditioning at the back of my mind understood them. They were talking about killing someone or other, in the tone of someone who had played a prank of some sort. There was neither remorse nor fear in the voices that sounded both male and young as they walked past. They looked male and young, too, two of them possibly juveniles, the other three probably early twenties. They also sounded drunk, or perhaps high.

I let their voices recede away from us, out of hearing distance, then their footsteps. I know I have a more acute sense of hearing than a normal

person. I waited till I couldn’t hear them, which meant they couldn’t hear me, and then I said, as low as I could, “What do you mean by this? Why did you grab me?”

He shook his head. His features remained as hard to read as ever. When he answered it was in the same voice I’d employed. Almost soundless. “Remember the orders I was given. I’m supposed to keep you safe.” He made a face somewhere between disgust and anger. “It’s probably not possible now.”

I opened my mouth, but he shook his head. “Don’t. Not now. Let me try to get us to a safe place. But first you might want to take off your suit, and hide it.”

“Why?”

“Same reason I hid mine,” he said. “It’s too good, too expensive, too likely to cause someone to stop us and rob us. You can’t want that, any more than I do. I’ll hide it here, on the grounds. It’s unlikely anyone is going to comb the grounds tree by tree, unless they have reason to think they’ll find the Good Man in one, and they don’t.”

It took me a moment, but I obeyed. There didn’t seem to be anything to gain in defying him. I doubted that he wanted to get me out of my broomer suit and steal it, or something of the sort. For one, it wouldn’t fit him. For another I had a feeling I was in the presence of one of the most honorable men I’d ever met. I felt a reliance, a trust in him that didn’t make any sense. Perhaps, I told myself, it was only that I trusted him because Simon trusted him. Simon didn’t strike me as an idiot. And neither was I to come to rely on this man so much in such a short acquaintance.

So I removed my suit and gave it to him. He disappeared with it, around the tree, and I followed. He skirted close to a clump of tall, overgrown bushes, and then near another tree. Between tree and bush, into a dark area, he thrust the suit. Then he turned, and nodded, seeming not at all surprised to see me so near.

He extended his hand to me. “We shall be a happy couple, again,” he said.

“A happy couple in this?” I asked.

“What, you think there aren’t any?” he asked. “People might be scared and shaken, worried for their possessions, and unsure of what the future will bring, but I warrant you that they’ll also be excited and interested, and,

not least of all, grateful that their normal work and duties have been interrupted, and happy that they can take the time off to be together."

It was probably true, but it didn't make it any more pleasant.

It was a strange situation. I didn't know Alexis or trust him. But I knew one thing for certain, he was supposed to protect me. What part of that also meant that he was supposed to keep me from doing anything I might want to do, I didn't know. I was very much afraid that he thought the two were sides of the same coin. And I couldn't allow that. You see, I intended to rescue Simon.

Yes, it would be dangerous, and it was unlikely, and no one would hold it against me if I had refused to do it.

But he had given me shelter and he'd accepted me with no condition and no demur. It was not honorable nor decent for me to abandon him to his fate. And while I might not have been brought up to love or friendship, I had been brought up to honor and duty.

I put my hand forward, and let Alexis Brisbois grasp it. His hand was cold and calloused. He held me close, all the way back from the lawn to a path. We walked down it, meeting groups of people who didn't give us more than a passing glance. So far at least, the disguise they'd given me was working.

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What Mad Universe

"HOW DID YOU RECOGNIZE ME?" I ASKED.

There had probably been very little thought involved in his dragging me back to the same hotel room we'd first rented. The strange thing is that Alexis still had the codes for it. "Rented it for a week," he explained. "I always do. It's a habit that's seen me through more than once." I didn't want to think of his past of conspiracy nor what it might mean now. Nor what he was playing at now.

I sat on the plastic-looking bedspread and looked at him. I felt suddenly very tired, and it occurred to me that other than the catnap I'd caught while Royce Allard changed my appearance, I hadn't slept in over twenty-four hours. But the tiredness went beyond physical. After all we'd done, after all I'd tried, we were back where we'd been when the ball had been interrupted and the palace attacked.

I realized I'd said something like that, when Alexis shook his head. "Not…exactly," he said. "Oh, sure, we're back here physically, but we do know more. We know that the Good Man is prisoner, we know who is in charge of this. We know—"

"We do?"

"I have a pretty good idea, at least," he said. "That's what I was doing in Olympus, while you were—What were you doing, precisely?"

There was a tone of amusement in his voice, as though I'd done something funny. It made me grit my teeth. "I was making preparations to rescue Simon. What else would I be doing?"

The amusement changed to something sharper edged as he said, "Perhaps being sensible. Who gave you the idea that you could do this? On your own? And…Who helped you change your appearance?"

"How did you recognize me?" I asked, heating to my theme. "Who told you where I was? Did you follow me? How did you ambush me?" And

that last was more material than I could tell him, since I could hear much better than normal humans. But I hadn't heard him.

He shrugged. "It's stupid and suicidal," he told me. "For you to think you can rescue the Good Man on your own or, in fact, at all. You will go back to Olympus. I will escort you off the seacity and some distance on the way. And then you'll promise me that you'll go back. That you'll not try to return here. That you'll leave me to rescue the Good Man, a job for which I'm far better equipped than you are. That you'll stay in Olympus until I bring him back safe and sound, or until we both die."

For all I was sure—almost sure at least—that he didn't belong to the same class as Keeva and Simon, he spoke with the sort of easy authority that assumes it will be obeyed. It was much like being a toddler and being told that I was going to be a good girl, and what being a good girl entailed. It never occurred to any of the adults that a three-year-old would not merely disobey, but say no and mean it, and set another course of action. I wondered if that was where my relationship with my foster parents had gone wrong; if that was why I'd never truly been their daughter, even if they'd had the raising of me since birth.

And now I was all set to do it again. I looked up into the dogged, homely face, and into the dark brown, confident eyes, and I said, "No."

It took him a moment to absorb it, as though I were speaking some long-forgotten language. "No?"

"No. I will not go back to Olympus. I will not promise not to return. There is nothing I can do or get in Olympus that will help Simon. There is nothing I can say that will persuade them to risk whatever balance they think they've achieved to come to our rescue. And I will not go back. No one wants me there. No one wants me here, either," I added, with scrupulous honesty. "But if I am here, at least I can perhaps do something to help Simon. I owe him that much."

"I promised him I'd keep you safe. You owe him to let me keep you safe."

I shrugged. "That was when the palace was attacked. He told you to keep me safe and get me out of there, both of which you've done, thank you. Now your duty is done. You kept me as safe as I could be kept. Now is the time for you to go and do whatever it is you're meant to do—look after

yourself or your family, or whatever. That thing you said that most people were doing: enjoying a holiday. Your job is done. Go."

He looked as though he'd very much like to murder me. He said something under his breath. It was probably *"merde."* For reasons that could make no sense to anyone, and least of all to me, his expression cheered me immensely. Perhaps it was that you don't get that mad at people you don't care for.

Then he sighed, and he said, in a voice of deep and heartfelt loathing, "I do not know why the *Bon Dieu* thought it necessary to create females, unless it is to drive men to despair. Of all the nonsensical, stupid creatures __"

He stopped sharply because I asked him a question. He frowned. "What that has to do with anything, I don't know. Or what business it is of yours. But no, Madame. Or at least not that I ever felt any attraction to the male of the species. Which doesn't stop me wondering why the species must be saddled with women."

I glared back at him. "You're not saddled with me," I said. "You're not obligated to stay with me. I will be fine on my own. I have been fine since I was three and able to look after myself, and if you think Earth is any stranger than the world I grew up in, then you—"

"I don't want to discuss it," he said. "I can't convince you to leave, and you can't convince me to leave you. I suggest we call a truce and go to sleep."

I glared at him. "We're supposed to be rescuing Simon."

"You've been awake how long?" he said. "You're supposed to sleep. I don't care how tough or how capable you were designed to be, you're not made of dimatough. You're still made of human flesh, and you should go to sleep."

We'd reached the point in the procedures when I'd have argued if he'd told me I was supposed to breathe oxygen. And there was really no good reason for it. Well, there wasn't any reason for it, good or not. It was just that I didn't like this man, I didn't like that he'd constituted himself in authority over me, and I hated that he was trying to keep me safe in a way that denied me both thought and autonomy, and everything an adult is supposed to have.

All my life I'd been told I was more capable than normal human beings, and now I was being treated as though I weren't capable of anything at all. And by a man who was a servant, a menial—

At this point in my thought, I stopped because I gurgled with laughter. You see, in its own way, the world I was brought up in was as egalitarian as the Sans Culottes. It's a different type of equality, though. Instead of a majority enforcing that everyone should be equal, it is assumed that the individual has the right to tell the majority to take a flying leap. And also the right to ignore any authority, duly constituted or not, who tries to tell him otherwise. Which meant that every citizen of Eden was equal to every other citizen in the ability to be free and take the consequences.

"I'm not more than human," I told the very puzzled Brisbois, as he shook his head at me. "I never thought of myself that way, and certainly not in the Earth sense, and damn it, I don't need bodyguards or servants. What I'm proposing, Monsieur Brisbois, is that you let me leave and go about what I think I must do. And then you can do what you please."

He shook his head, in mute, stubborn refusal. "No. I was told to protect you and I will protect you."

"What are you?" I asked, and for the second time in a very short time made an exception to my rule against rudeness. "Simon's dog or his slave?"

His mouth contorted in a sneer. If his smile made him look younger and much more pleasant, this expression made him look older and as though he'd rather kill me than look at me. "What I am, Madame, is a disciplined fighting man. Disciplined fighting men take orders and obey their superior officers. Which St. Cyr is. If I stop obeying him, then I'm nothing but a hoodlum, a…a violent criminal. Which I was once, I grant you, but which I do not wish to be ever again."

"Well, I am not a disciplined fighting man!"

This brought the sneer into a guffaw. "Well, no. Madame Sienna, please, stop being foolish. We're both very tired, and nothing can be gained by us screaming at one another. You take the bed. I shall lie down on the floor and sleep. And when we wake we shall revisit this topic. I don't think anything productive can be said or done by two people as tired and frustrated as we are now."

I glared at him, searching for an answer, when it hit me that if I stayed awake even a few more minutes I was likely to fall on my face with

tiredness. Then it occurred to me that I should offer to sleep on the floor instead, but a look at the stained carpet convinced me this was a very bad idea. So I glared at him some more and said, “Fine.”

In my mind, I was sure that while I needed sleep, I would recover faster than he did. I thought this as I lay down lengthwise on the bed and closed my eyes. I would sleep a couple of hours, then get up, step over the sleeping Brisbois and go off into the city to find out how to rescue Simon.

I woke up an indefinable time later, in utter darkness. For a moment I was puzzled as to what had woken me. Then I realized it had been the opening of the door.

I leapt off the bed, half expecting to trip on Brisbois. But he was not on the floor, where he’d laid down. And when I rushed to the door and opened it, I saw him some distance away walking down the street.

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Clash by Night

I PROVED I WAS FASTER THAN MOST PEOPLE—IF NOT SMARTER—IN THE NEXT FEW seconds, as I checked my weapons, closed the door behind me and ran after Brisbois as fast as I could.

As I got close to him, I slowed down, favoring silence over speed and knitting myself with the shadows, so as not to attract his attention.

Following him, I walked down the street and into what looked like a walled open-air market. The streets were more deserted than they'd been, possibly because a nighttime of burning things and looting had taken its toll. There were people asleep in the open air market, legs protruding from beneath stalls, or cloak-wrapped bodies huddled in corners. I guess looting and burning really took it out of you.

Towards the back of the market was a gate that I surmised led to loading docks. It was closed and held so by a mechanism that involved a code pad. Brisbois typed a code into the pad, and as the gate opened, stepped through. I lagged behind, trying to give him a head start, so I could step through unnoticed. As the gate started closing again, I squeezed in.

The other side was darker than the market, so dark, in fact, that I couldn't see more than a palm in front of my face. I stopped, afraid to give myself away, and heard Brisbois's voice coming from my left, "Here."

It sounded like a response to someone, and I dropped back into the shadows and looked around to find him a hundred steps away from me, no more than a glimmer of clothing and movement in the gloom. There was a suggestion of someone he was speaking to, but the someone was even more distant and lost in the gloom, visible only when he moved and only by the movement. Strangely, I was sure it was a man. I could not hear him, though. He must be using a whisper so low it was close to subvocalization. But it was clear that Brisbois was answering someone, as he said, "No, she's asleep. Yes, I'm sure."

There was a pause, as though he were listening to his interlocutor, and then, “I didn’t bring her. I followed her. It was Keeva and his plans. No, I’m sure of it. Yes, I know.”

Another pause. “I’ve tried, but short of drugging her and dragging her, I don’t know how I’d accomplish that.”

Another pause, this one long. “I see. The palace? Yes, that could work.”

I felt my hair stand up at the back of my neck, and wondered what could work and what was being planned for me. It was clear, whatever else was happening, that Alexis Brisbois was not on the up and up. Look: Simon, his supposed boss and the center of his loyalty, was in prison. He couldn’t be out here and speaking to Brisbois. But Brisbois had left the hotel room in the middle of the night to come and confer with someone in secret.

That they were talking about me was obvious. That my being here discomfited them was also obvious. I wasn’t sure why that might be, except, of course, that Brisbois knew I was enhanced and might be afraid I’d figure out what he was doing.

Brisbois was talking again. “Yes,” he said. “It would be best for the execution of the Good Man to happen as soon as possible and as publicly as possible.”

I was so shocked by these words that it took me a moment to focus. It was all I could do not to run from cover, and not to shoot Alexis Brisbois. But even as my mind processed that the “execution of the Good Man” had to refer to Simon—while there were a lot of people killed, it was hard to think of a single one that could be dignified with the name “execution,” particularly a planned one. Attack, maybe, or assault. But execution had to be Simon. Which meant not only that Alexis Brisbois had never been as loyal as I thought, but that he’d been playing a double game all along. Which meant…

“Yes, I think she’s behind this too,” Brisbois said, clearly answering something. “I’ll do my best to neutralize her.”

I took a deep breath. And I’d do my best to stay not-neutralized. With that thought, I reached for my burner.

I was drawing a bead in the middle of Alexis’s back, when the world exploded. I have no way of explaining it, except that way. Suddenly the

area was full of sound, light, flying debris, and I was jumping backwards, out of instinct more than thought, huddling against the gate while debris pelted me. First seen in that explosion of light, was Brisbois, looking startled, shocked, and someone talking to him—a male in a dark brown suit, with a liberty cap on his head. Something about him was familiar, but in that sudden startling glimpse, there was no way of knowing for sure who it was.

And then Brisbois stumbled over me, catching at the gate to hold himself, dealing me a kick in the ribs by accident, and said, “You!”

His hand grabbed at my back between my shoulders, hauling me up, even as I heard the sound of his punching the code into the gate pad, then pushed at the automatically opening gate, forcing it open, scraping me against the gate at both sides, the opening was so small for me. How could he have fit through it, when he was much larger?

And then he pushed my back against the wall, pushed himself close to me, and bent to kiss me. His mouth sealed over mine, as I pushed ineffectually at his shoulders. His mouth tasted of wine and something sweet, and he put his arms around me, immobilizing me, turning his body just so that I could not knee him in the groin.

I struggled to free myself, but he was holding me in such a way that even my scrabbling would be invisible to anyone walking by. He was so large and had engulfed me so completely that only a trained observer would notice my reluctance. And he must be enhanced for strength because my fighting wasn’t accomplishing anything, though it didn’t stop my trying.

The glow of the explosion moved away, and the commotion caused by the people sleeping in the market rushing out, and then he pulled away and let me go.

I wiped at my mouth, glaring up at him. “What was that in the name of?” I asked, my voice close to a growl, even though it was little more than a furious whisper.

“What are you doing here?”

“I followed you!” I said.

He frowned. “Did you hear—” Then, as though realizing I wasn’t likely to tell him the truth. “Oh, never mind. What in hell possessed you?”

“Me? What possessed you? And who were you talking to, wink, wink, nudge, nudge, planning Simon’s execution?”

“Simon—What? The Good Man is not—” He gave every appearance of biting his tongue. “You just put yourself at risk for no reason. Let’s get out of here.”

“You kissed me!” I said.

“A wonderful way to hide our faces without seeming to,” he said and started pulling me along the closed stalls, seemingly without direction, but in a way that betrayed its being intentional. I tried to pull my hand from his. He held it tight.

“Your face,” I said. “Because mine—”

“Well done,” he said, and dragged me through what seemed like a little tunnel cut in a poured ceramite wall. We came up against a small gate. It was chained shut. He grabbed the chain and twisted. Then he pushed me out the gate and onto the road.

I was about to ask why that way, but instead looked the other way, towards the entrance we’d used before. There were men in liberty caps in front of it.

Brisbois muttered something that might very well have been *“merde,”* but he had been talking to a man in a liberty cap, himself.

I couldn’t trust him. I’d been willing to go along with his trying to protect me, to an extent, while I thought he was being blindly loyal to Simon and trying to keep me safe, stupid though the idea was. But now I wasn’t even sure he was loyal, or trying to keep me safe.

I let him lead me by the hand down a narrow lane, until I realized he was taking me back to the hotel. And then, the first time he relaxed his grasp on my hand, I pulled my hand away and ran madly into the night, taking blind turns until I was sure I’d lost him.

The last thing I heard him say, somewhere behind me, was *“merde.”*

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Driving Blind

I RAN UNTIL I COULD RUN NO MORE. OUT OF BREATH, LOST, I LEANED AGAINST A wall and took stock of my surroundings.

I'd somehow run myself out of the cheaper neighborhoods, and into one of the more expensive areas. Not quite to the palace, but an area where Simon's clerks and accountants would have lived, together with clerks and accountants for other businesses, with middle class shop owners and managers of various enterprises.

It had been a pleasant neighborhood, each house set well within a garden, and from the smells in the air, distinct beneath the smells of fire and blood, there were scents of orange and of various exotic flowers.

I had a vague memory, without a precise date, of coming to a neighborhood like this, perhaps this very same neighborhood, with Simon, to visit his old nanny. The house, accounting for the fact that houses on Earth were above ground and in Eden tended to be underground, was as comfortable as anything I'd grown up with. And there had been gardeners at work in the grounds of various neighbors.

If the fury of the revolutionaries, or the looters, if there was a difference at this point, had burned itself out in the cheaper neighborhoods it carried on here, with vigor.

While I leaned against the wall, I heard the sounds of the same song I'd heard in the palace, and then a series of blows, as of a blade against wood.

Nearby a house was aflame, completely engulfed, with the fire licking at the roof, and casting an uncomfortable heat all the way past the walled garden to where I stood across the opposite side of the street.

From the other side of that house came the sounds of something hitting wood, and from the house to the side nearest me came screams and the zap of burners, the curious smell the burner rays left in the air.

I didn’t want to move. I’d run so far, and I was in a place I didn’t understand, surrounded by people with hostile intent. What I wanted to do, arguably what I should do, was to stay still and shut up, and save myself first, then find Simon and save him, and find out from him what to do to quell this or at the very least to get him to safety.

But I remembered Martha telling me that whatever Simon had tried to do had escaped his control. And then I thought that there were innocents being hurt, innocents dying, through no fault of their own, but because they’d been caught in a peculiar time and place. If I’d been armed in the ballroom, during the ball, I could have stopped the nonsense right then, and then Simon might have been able to hold onto power; to figure out what to do next, and this would never have happened.

I didn’t get the option of staying still; of doing nothing.

With a groan, I pushed off the wall and ran towards the sound of burners zapping.

The gate to the garden had been torn open, and a group of young men in liberty caps were making a semicircle around the entrance of the house, zapping at anything that moved, or seemed to move inside.

The defenders were not totally helpless. One or more people in there had burners. It wasn’t easy to figure out if it was one or more, because whenever a burner ray came out of a side of the house, all the attackers would turn on it, and the burner would go silent. The first time this happened, I thought the attackers had hit the defender. They thought so too. The song they were singing raised up and became more mocking.

But they didn’t advance towards the house. They were, I realized, just past the maximum range where a low-power burner could hit them. The defenders—who presently shot out of another window, drawing the attackers’ fire—only had the sort of little burner that is sold for personal defense. Good for about six feet but not more, the sort of weapon that is fine for every day, but not much use in this situation. Probably a lady’s burner, since those tended to have limited range in order to be small and portable, capable of being hid in a handbag or a pocket.

The attackers, on the other hand, were using long-range burners.

Which put the defenders at a distinct disadvantage. While the attackers were cowardly enough to stay out of range, not risking even a minor burn, they could draw the fire of the defenders. The defenders had to know the

only thing keeping them safe was the remaining charge in their burners. But those burners always had a low level of charge, and the attackers knew that too.

They were keeping safe, drawing fire, until no more burner-rays came from inside the house, and then they would take over and…I wasn't sure what they'd do, not the details, but there was the house next door burning, and there was the song they were singing, about bringing the high down low and raising themselves up to make justice over the unjust.

This would not end well.

There was only one thing I could do. I did it. I had a burner in each pocket, and I pulled them both out, and shot as fast as I could. One, two, three four, starting with the ones in the middle, who were nearer me and therefore could respond with better accuracy.

I had the advantages of surprise and speed but, as Alexis Brisbois had so clearly told me, *you can't fight a mob.*

They had the advantage of numbers. I'd managed to take six of them out, with deadly accuracy, when I had to duck returning fire, because one of the attackers had turned around and was firing at me. I fired back and got him, but then one of them said, in a loud voice, "Hold up or the next one goes through your heart."

I looked and realized his burner was, in fact, pointed at my heart in such a way that, should he press the trigger, I would be dead.

"Drop the burners," he said.

I did, with an inward groan, as I tried to calculate my chances of running away. I would have to run away. At least I'd given the people inside some respite, and perhaps now they could fight back. There was, of course, a chance I'd get shot running away, but I didn't think so, even though—I noted—there were now three burners trained on me. The other two defenders were going through the pockets of their fallen comrades, removing valuables and weapons. I wondered if this was done in the spirit of not wasting anything, or if it was that sort of group.

My chances of escaping totally unscathed from three burners were good. Not perfect. Nothing in life is perfect, but good.

I shifted my weight to my other foot, ready to start running any moment. And then I saw him. I saw him out the corner of my eye, and was momentarily startled out of my calculations because the young man looked

like Len. The resemblance—a lanky build, pale hair, catlike movements—was almost exact in this half-light, by the reflected fire of the blaze next door. And while my mind knew Len was dead, my back brain clearly didn't.

Before I could stop, I had reacted, with a look in his direction, a movement. One of the guys with a burner on me turned. Before he could aim, I'd got the third burner from my pocket, and was shooting him, and then his friend to the right. The one to the left I couldn't get to in time, but the young man had taken him out with a shot of his totally inadequate burner. Only now the two who had been searching the corpses were going for their weapons. I nailed one in time, but the other got me. I felt the burner singe through my shoulder, shouted "*merde,*" which is either a testimony to the wonderfulness of the implant, or a learned reflex, and then not-Len had shot the bastard, and left me gasping, grabbing my shoulder, while a sticky substance ran down my sleeve.

The man approached, curious but wary, his burner still in hand. As he should be, since he had no idea if I was a friend or yet another would-be looter.

His eyes widened as he got closer, and he said, "Uh. Hello. I didn't realize you were—I didn't expect a woman."

"Do you want me to drop my burner?" I asked through clenched teeth and not just because my shoulder was hurting with that peculiar kind of burn a wound has when your body is trying to figure out how to react to the injury. The other part of it was that he still looked like Len. Oh, not exactly. He was younger and his shoulders were narrower, and his nose was perfectly straight, while Len's had been broken early on in his pilot training due to his forgetting to close his safety belt and taking a header into the control panel. It had healed slightly crooked, which made him look less than blandly sweet, which this young man did look. Save for the glint in his gray eyes, which was very much as Len's had been.

I got the odd impression that this young man was enjoying the turmoil. Oh, not *enjoying*, perhaps. He looked like a well-brought-up young man, which he would be, if he was an inhabitant of this area of town. I doubted he enjoyed the knowledge his neighbors were dying or his family in danger, but he was…alive? Interested? Exerting a perhaps natural bloody mindedness kept under wraps until now?

He looked me up and down, and sighed. "Depends. Why are you so heavily armed, 'demoiselle, if you don't mind my asking?"

“The streets aren’t safe.”

This surprised a chuckle out of him. He chuckled like Len, too, and could have been Len’s younger brother. He looked over my shoulder at the street, then said, “I say you pick up the burners you dropped earlier, and then help me…collect these gentlemen’s burners, so that my family has something to defend itself with.” He glanced at my shoulder. “Unless your shoulder is so bad that you must have my father’s attention instantly?”

“Your father?”

“Doctor Dufort. Didn’t you know? We’ve been helping people. That’s why they targeted us, I think,” he said, as he divested the nearest corpse of weapons.

I didn’t answer because I was momentarily without the breath to answer. In Eden, due to old and odd custom, men took their wives’ names upon marriage, but Len’s unmarried name had been Dufort. Had some of the family stayed behind? If so, there was a definite family resemblance.

If we’d been on Earth, I’d have been Madame Dufort. I didn’t know why Eden did it other way around. It might well have been a whim of the early colonists. He’d been called Len Sienna. But on Earth—

“I didn’t know anything about you,” I said. “Only that you were under attack and seemed to be outgunned.”

He gave me a curious look, his eyes slightly narrowed, then said, “Come on in. My father will see to your wound.”

A few minutes later, I was sitting in a chair, getting my arm bandaged. The man doing the bandaging looked…all right, not quite like Len’s grandfather, but close enough that you could tell there was a family resemblance. He’d put something on my arm to stop it hurting, and was now bandaging it. “Not quite bad enough for regen anyway, but it should close in twenty-four hours,” he said.

He and his son, Corin, and his wife had welcomed me in, and the doctor had thanked me in profuse, confused words, in the tone of a man not sure about this woman who had come out of nowhere to defend them. “You see,” he said, while he was bandaging my arm. “I thought we knew each other…All of us, in this small seacity, in the…the ones who were loyal to the Good Man. And…well, we didn’t expect you.”

By which he meant that he didn’t know me as belonging to their small circle, and therefore he was dubious of my motives and my loyalty. What

could I tell him, precisely? What could I tell him to reassure him?

It wasn't, I thought, that he suspected everyone who hadn't been in the direct pay of the Good Man of being against him and against all those who served him. It couldn't be. He wasn't a fool. But the truth was that there must be a certain trust among a certain class of people here. It would be much like in my native world, where the pilots and navigators of long-distance darkships were usually married to each other. In fact, you either married your alternate, or you traveled alone, which was a dangerous practice, since if you became disabled, the whole ship would be lost.

There was a trust, a connection, between the families of pilots and navigators that simply didn't extend outside it. It was as though they formed a separate class of people, of families who generally interacted with each other. Because the price of bioengineering your children as pilots or navigators was very high, entrance into the group was slow, though steady, and probably the only thing that stopped them from having three eyes and sixteen fingers, and so the families stayed in touch through the generations and trusted each other more than anyone else.

It had been the almost immediate attempts to match me to someone, anyone, who could have piloted the ship for me that had been at the root of my wanting to get away. What had made me stay away, decide to stay on Earth, come what may, was knowing that if I married again, it would be because I'd come to care for the other person very much. And if I cared for someone as I'd cared for Len, and found myself stuck out on a ship with him dying, no matter for what reason, nor how, I couldn't endure it.

My life seemed to still tilt around that moment when I'd been alone with Len, knowing I couldn't save him, knowing I'd have to shoot him. I didn't want to have to do that ever again.

And so I'd escaped from Eden and, I thought, from its tight social circles, where everyone had known you since your decanting.

But I'd miscalculated badly. And what was more, Lucius, if he was indeed aware of what I was doing, and Martha had miscalculated with me. Liberte seacity might be larger than the world where I'd been raised. After all, all we had was a hollowed asteroid. And no, we didn't know exactly how many people lived there, because in Eden everyone was averse to giving unnecessary information to the authorities. But while Liberte might be larger—probably not by much—it was not the same type of society.

Liberte owned other territories and other seacities, and there were many more people under its control.

Here, in the center of its governance, there would be classes of people who worked closely with the Good Man. There would be those who served him as administrators, and, yes, doctors, and medtechs, and other white collar workers. Other than the Good Man himself, these people would have the most power.

And then there would be a panoply of people who would cater to the Good Man's physical needs. Yes, all right, his intimate physical needs, too, if what I'd heard about Simon's father was halfway true. But also his other needs: food, clothing, cleaning, gardening. And then there were the people who catered to all of those people, the vast class of people who lived in the lower levels of the seacity.

My mistake had been to look at that mass of people and see them as amorphous, undifferentiated, permeable. They were not. They were circles of people, each one as hereditarily closed, as guarded, as well known to each other as the navigators and pilots of Eden. For generations, their position in relation to the Good Man had made them better than the other people around them and certainly than the other people in the territories. I realized the rebellion in Liberte would not be people against people, but circles against circles.

The upper circles, those close to the Good Man, those close to Simon, had been consulted in his plans to declare *"la revolution"* and would have understood his motives, which I still didn't fully understand, and his reasoning. The others…the kitchen drudge, the multitudes beneath that, who catered to the Good Man's servants, those would have no reason to be loyal and were probably the ones who were trying to seize power with this coup. At least, I thought, most of the people I'd seen, with liberty caps and arms, most of the looters and fighters on the street had looked like people who'd have lived in the lower levels.

I sat at what had clearly been the family's kitchen table, while the doctor finished bandaging my arm and looked at me out of curious hazel eyes. There was enough of Len in his features, in his expressions, that I understood the enquiry and worry and I said, "Of course. Of course, you will not trust me, unless you know who I am. I mean, surely this is a rebellion of the lower levels of the seacity against everyone else."

His forehead creased, but he gave something not quite a laugh. “The lower levels? But no. There wouldn’t be…Most of the people here are young. Very young. They’re Sans Culottes from the territories and from Shangri-la, and from the prisons in Shangri-la.”

“Then why are you so curious about who I am?” I asked.

His look on me sharpened. Corin stood across the table from me, leaning against a wall. I had a feeling the hand casually in his pants pocket was holding one of those little burners he’d been firing out the window before. The doctor’s wife, a middle-aged lady who’d tried to cluck over me, had been escorted by her son somewhere in the depths of the house. “I mean, I understand you don’t trust me,” I said.

“Ah,” the doctor said. “Ah. Well, we don’t trust you because you are clearly a cultured person, from your speech and…ah…very unusual.”

“In what way unusual?” I asked.

He sighed, as though his confusion was overlaid with exasperation at my slowness of mind. A veiled look at his son and an almost imperceptible shake of the head, which I hoped meant that he shouldn’t shoot me just yet, and he said, “*Alors*, ’demoiselle, not many women walk abroad alone, on a night like this, and much less will they know how to shoot as well as you do.”

It was like a bucket of water. There are things you realize, when you’re a stranger to the culture, and some you won’t fully understand, and others you do but forget to take them into account.

In Eden, I won’t say that men and women are exactly alike. That would be almost impossible, would it not? Most unmodified women are not as strong as most unmodified men. In Eden, it would be frowned upon if a man challenged a woman to a fistfight, in the same way someone enhanced for speed would be shunned if dueling a normal human. But other than that, gender didn’t matter much. A woman outdoors and fighting in disturbed times would be no more strange than a man out doors and fighting.

I’d observed that Liberte was different, but I’d failed to take it into account. Of course, I seemed strange to them. In Liberte, even more than in Olympus, it seemed to me that women were protected. I had a vague notion this might come from the parent culture of the seacity, but I could be wrong.

“And then,” he said, “yes, we should know you, or at least have heard of you. There aren’t many people in our class, nor many who would risk

their lives to defend Doctor Moreau."

"I thought your name was Dufort?"

"And what is your name, M'moiselle?"

I took a deep breath. "Zen. Zenobia Sienna."

He narrowed his eyes. "The Good Man's friend? But no. I met her many times."

"I…they did something in Olympus," I said. "To make me fit in. Temporary changes to my features and also to the way I move and speak. I'm not sure how they did it, but—"

He studied me through narrowed eyes. He didn't say it was impossible. He nodded once. "Yes. I see. It is possible at least. But why did you come back, if you'd escaped as far as Olympus?"

I shrugged. "The Good Man is imprisoned. I couldn't leave him here, at the mercy of his captors."

At that moment there was a sound of something, like a loud hiss, as though of a projectile or a rocket. And then an explosion rocked the house, and the doctor fell, bleeding from his chest.

"Father!" Corin shouted, hurrying near. His mother came from wherever she'd been, holding some source of light in her hand, that was more or less covered by her cupped hand, save where it was directed. Where it was directed was the doctor's chest, from which a piece of shrapnel protruded. He bled slowly, the blood trickling out onto his clothes forming a dark stain. At least it wasn't gushing, which of course could be good or bad.

I knelt and set my fingers on the beat of a strong pulse on his neck. "He's alive," I said.

Madame Dufort was looking down. She seemed strangely unaffected. Then I looked at her again, in the half-light of the fires ignited in the explosion, and realized she wasn't so much unaffected as carefully controlled. She nodded to me. "We must take him where we can care for him." She had a light accent—French, I thought—but more perceptible than her husband's or her son's.

She disappeared and came back moments later with what looked like a tray, which she unfolded into a platform. It didn't surprise me. It was a floating platform used for carrying the sick in hospitals. In my world of

origin, Eden, we used something more akin to a sheet, but Earth and Eden had developed separately for three hundred years.

Another bomb hit the house, but nothing touched us.

The three of us, carefully, got the doctor onto the stretcher. He did not wake, nor give any sign of being aware of what we were doing. The fragment that protruded from his chest was a dull gray, probably a piece of ceramite.

Another bomb and I felt the whoosh of air go by behind me. I moved around to place myself between the front of the house and the stretcher, nudging Madame Dufort aside. She gave me a quizzical look, as she pressed the areas in the stretcher that made it rise, then she half-ran down a corridor to the left. Corin and I followed, managing the stretcher between us as if we'd rehearsed this. We carried him past family pictures showing Corin growing from baby to a young man.

In the half-light the pictures looked like something left over from another time, forgotten like debris left behind by the receding tide, lost and out of place on the shore.

When we were almost at the end of the hallway a door opened at about waist level, taking up part of the hallway floor. Mme. Dufort stood by a panel operated by a genlock. She had clearly opened this passage and we hurried past her carrying the stretcher down what turned out to be a long slightly twisting ramp, into a straight hallway. As we hurried half bent over the stretcher, it seems to me we went past shadowy forms in the darker areas around us. I didn't stop to think, but these forms seemed to be vast glass cylinders in which undefined bulks appeared to move.

From above us came the sound of more explosions and of something heavy falling. Mme. Dufort moved ahead of us and opened the door to a room on the left. The room was almost cramped, small and crowded with instruments and machines, some of them covered in material and others showing rows and rows of undecipherable dials and displays.

The only lights were a sort of diffuse emergency lights, concentrating on where we were, and everything else was cast into obscurity save for where light glinted on reflective surfaces. It was like moving in a world of half-perceived glistening great beasts, none of them making much sense.

Doctor Dufort lay on the table. He was still unconscious, though we saw no reason why.

“Shock,” his wife said, after examining him with instruments I didn’t understand and couldn’t see clearly. And then, “Corin, I think they’ve entered the house and it would be time…”

“Yes, *Maman*,” he said, and he ducked into the hallway. I followed.

He looked, surprised, over his shoulder at me, his face reflecting the scant light, and looking very pale. “Why?” he asked, and it was understood he was asking me why I’d followed him.

“Your mother said there are people in the house. I thought you might need a helping hand.”

He shook his head. “No. We have made…arrangements to protect us, and our…and what Father knows. There is a device in the house. It will detonate. If the party in the house knows what they’re looking for…They might not be the only ones, but they are doubtlessly the most interested.”

We walked back almost the same way we’d come, then ducked into a different room, which I’d missed on my way down. Part of the reason I’d missed it is that it looked exactly the same as the wall around it, save for one small spot, where Corin had pressed his finger.

The room was very small—about the size of a regular closet—and empty.

It was also better lit than the rest of the basement, probably because it was so small and the walls were stark and glistening white. Corin looked over his shoulder at me again, but I couldn’t read his expression, and I didn’t know what he was looking for. He shrugged minutely, as though giving up on whatever had concerned him, then put his finger on one point of the wall. Then on the other. Something beeped. A faint voice said, “Press —to confirm.”

And just as Corin was—I presume—about to, there was a whooshing sound from the door between the house and this annex. Corin slammed his whole palm against the wall, and I jumped out into the hallway.

How do you recognize people? In the half-light, with my burner drawn and ready to shoot him, there was only one thing I was absolutely sure of. The man running towards me was Alexis Brisbois.

He ran with the lumbering gait of very large men, but fast, so fast that I hesitated on the burner for a moment, and he was on me, taking the burner from my hands, shouting out, “Corin, Corin.”

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Something Wicked

CORIN CAME RUNNING OUT OF THE INNER ROOM AS I WAS STRUGGLING TO GET HOLD of the burner. “Alexis,” he said, then a string of words in French, and then, “I’m so glad it was you. I thought—”

“They’re right behind,” Alexis said. “I have arranged to get you out of this. Were you about to blow up the house?”

Corin half nodded and made a sound in his throat that might have been suppressed laughter or a barely contained sob. “I almost blew you up,” he said.

“Never mind that,” Alexis said. “Can you resume the sequence? They were right behind me, and although it will take them time to find the proper place and force the door open, you and I know it must be done. For that matter, blowing up the house will only buy us an hour, maybe two. I can get you out of here. I have made arrangements.”

A closed, mulish expression passed through Corin’s features, and I thought, for just a moment, that I knew that expression, that I’d seen it on Len often enough, only this time I couldn’t imagine what it applied to.

You see, my husband was the nicest man in the world. He was also the only man I could neither bully nor seduce nor budge once his mind was made up. And when that expression appeared on his face, I had to come up with a better plan because Len was going to do what he thought was right and even I couldn’t stop him.

But I couldn’t imagine what Corin thought he was going to do. As he turned to go back into the room, Alexis Brisbois took advantage of my distraction to pull the burner out of my hand. As I turned to him, he said, “As for you, Madame, it’s hell’s own time you gave me. I thought you were dead, and what was I going to tell the Good Man?”

I was thinking of Brisbois talking to the man in the dark and seeming to arrange Simon’s execution. Was he going to try to convince me he was a

loyal servant all the way? Or was it possible I had the whole thing wrong? Unable to decide, I glared at him, and said, “I have other burners.”

Was that the twitch of a smile at the corner of his lips? People had found me scary and cold, meddling and commanding, annoying and useful, but I didn’t think anyone ever had found me amusing. Except, apparently, Alexis Brisbois. He let go of my arms, as though he didn’t think he need concern himself with being shot. Which he probably didn’t, because I couldn’t bring myself to shoot someone who didn’t expect it of me. We all have these little disabilities. “I saw you, in the dark,” I said. “I saw you talking to—”

There was warning in his eyes, and Corin was there, saying, “It is done,” and covering his ears. We covered ours, too, just in time to deaden the sound of the explosion, and feel it mostly in vibration all around. A heavy thud followed the explosion as, I suppose, the house fell in above us. The ground rocked under us.

Alexis turned, lowering his hands from his ears, and asked Corin, “How long do you think until they send another party to find the entrance? Or for the survivors of this one to try again?”

“As soon as it stops smoldering and is cool enough to enter,” Corin said, in a tired voice. “At which point, I hope we’ll be out of here.”

Alexis nodded. “Where is Father?”

I noted he didn’t say “your father.” Nothing in this mountain of a man with the blunt face resembled the Duforts, except that he was presumably human and that they all walked on two legs. But I had seen worse genetic surprises. It would certainly explain why he was here.

“*My* father,” Corin said, and it seemed to me he underlined the first word just slightly, “is in that room there.” He gestured with his head. “The one that’s open. My mother was tending to him, and I thought it was better to prevent surprises.”

The massive hand of the man who had once been on death row clapped Corin once on the shoulder. “Good thinking, that,” he said, and then turned and pelted down the hallway, going in the door where Dr. and Madame Dufort were.

It seemed to me that Corin’s face was frozen for a moment. Like there was something unpleasant in the association with Alexis; like there was

something about the whole situation that both bothered him and angered him.

I heard Alexis speak briskly, and a male and female voice answered him. “Absolutely not,” Madame Dufort said. “My husband has a broken rib, and is still very weak. You cannot move him within the hour.”

I was aware of Corin coming up behind me, and moving to stand beside me. The two of us filled the door, and the people inside the room ignored us.

“Father,” Alexis said, turning to Dr. Dufort. His tone was both questioning and anguished, a plea, I wasn’t sure for what.

The doctor looked up at him. He was very pale, and obviously shaken, but he looked better than I expected. Through the rent in his shirt, I could see a patch on his chest, not unlike the patch on my arm. That he was awake at all seemed to me a miracle.

“Of course, I must go,” he said, hoarsely. “Now, Madeleine, my dear, you know I must go. It’s not a choice between what I wish and what Alexis wishes, it’s a choice between death and life. I must go if I am to live. You know they’ll keep coming, you know why. If I don’t get out of here…And don’t even think of staying.”

“I’ve arranged for transport off of the isle,” Alexis said. “I can carry you to it.”

The doctor gave a laugh like a hiss and said, “You’ll have to. Unless you want to creep out of here and get caught. Are you sure of the transport? I heard that no one could leave by air.”

“It’s not by air,” Alexis said. “And yes, I made sure of it. I’ll get you out the way I would have gotten the Good Man out should he allow it.”

“How is he?”

Alexis shrugged. “Alive. Stubborn, I expect.”

“Of course.” The doctor got up, on shaking legs, retrieved a small bag from somewhere and started putting injectors and instruments into it.

Alexis didn’t say anything, but the doctor must have detected something in his posture or some half-suppressed movement of impatience. “I must take the tools of my trade, Alexis. Into the unknown, and at my age.” The last was almost a grumble. At some point he closed his bag, and Alexis lifted him. I thought I heard Corin huff by my side, but it was such a small sound that it was hard to be sure.

Alexis carried the doctor effortlessly, with Madame Dufort running alongside him, down a long hallway and then into a vast room.

To this day, I have no idea how vast the room was or precisely what it contained. I just know that, as I walked past, it seemed to me it was full of glass coffins, and within the glass coffins there floated…people. Or sometimes parts of people: a leg, an arm, not torn and bleeding as they'd be if they'd come off a living person, but whole and sealed, as though they had grown by themselves. There were also other organs, of the kind that were imprinted in my mind as "things that should be inside people and never outside" but most of all, what stayed in my memory was a kind of container at the end, which could be viewed as a coffin on its side. Inside it, floating in some liquid, surrounded by glass, was someone I'd swear was Simon—but the eyes were blank and the body contracted in the fetal position.

I stared at it, and Corin grabbed my arm and said, urgently, "Come on. We must go. They're going to blow this up."

"This?" I said. "This secret place, too?"

He pulled more urgently. "They must," he said. "The things in here…"

And he pulled me out completely.

We left the lab area and trotted down a narrow passageway for a long time. I lost sense of the center of the room and how far we traveled, because we were in the sort of space where the light came on just ahead of us and vanished behind us. It was like moving in a fog, or else in a dream, where the only space that existed was the space immediately ahead, and the space behind us vanished again.

Alexis ran, as though he weren't carrying a full-grown man, even if one smaller than himself. And Corin walked just ahead of me, pulling me if I delayed.

At the end of the tunnel we emerged into what seemed to be a public park, and miles away—as far as I could tell—from the neighborhood where the doctor's house had been.

I was shocked once again, by how peaceful a night could look, even when the human world was in turmoil. The night air was warm on my skin, and crickets were chirping in the shadows of palm trees. While we walked, without breaking stride, down a grass-covered slope, and then down narrow stone steps. From somewhere—probably many somewheres given the looting and burning going on—came the smell of fire and burning.

“Alexis?” a voice asked out of the dark.

“Yes,” Alexis answered.

“You were such a long time,” the voice said. It sounded young and diffident.

“Yes,” he said. “I met with some trouble. But everything is all right now. Here?”

“Nothing,” the voice said. I realized it was not only young but female.

“C’est bien,” Alexis said, and walked past a shadow standing on the beach, at the bottom of the stone steps. I spared her a glance as I went past. She was shorter than I, which was no great feat, as most women are, but also one of those young women who would have no trouble passing as young men, save for the breasts. The moonlight glinted on blond hair topped by a liberty cap.

I wondered once more what Alexis was playing at, and would have given the doctor and his family the warning if I thought there was the slightest chance they’d listen to me. But I wasn’t fool enough to think they might.

Alexis stepped heavily across the beach, still moving fast, still without giving the impression of being winded. The doctor’s wife ran alongside him, to keep up with the pace.

The beach was hardly that. There was a semicircular space of soft sand and, at the end of it, a bit into the sea as though enclosing the space, stood a ring of tall, dark stones. From a certain regularity about them, I guessed they were not real stones, but poured black dimatough.

In other words, we were in a private cove, probably the private beach of some property, where the owners could have disported in safety and privacy. The waves broke, passing through the tight space left open between the ring of stones. The water in the cove rose and fell with the effect of something breathing deeply. I could easily see it as a place for children to learn to swim, or for a family to enjoy the sea without being watched by strangers.

Now, as Alexis got to the edge of the water and continued into it, splashing up to his knees into the ocean, a shadow detached from the deeper shadow around the rocks. It revealed itself as it approached as a little boat, the kind of craft children will motor in around safe areas. And like a children’s toy, it made no sound, save the buzz of an electric motor.

There was no sound either, as Alexis nodded to the one man in the craft and then carefully, delicately, deposited the doctor in the little boat. The boatman nodded.

And then…and then the little craft grew a dome of transparent… ceramite or dimatough, I'd guess. And silently it submerged.

We waited in silence while I tried to make sense of what I'd seen. I'd guess that the little craft was a submarine's lifeboat. Its retractable, transparent dome had halved, retracting down to take in the doctor. Then it had closed again to take him to…a submarine waiting beyond the black rocks, I guessed.

The little craft came back silently, and Alexis turned to Madame Dufort and said, almost soundlessly, "Madame." She had stepped up to stand beside him, the sea wetting half of her very proper skirt, but she turned back, to where Corin and I had stopped at the edge of the sea. "Corin?" she said. "Son?"

Corin shook his head. *"Apres vous, Maman,"* he said. But I knew that voice, that stubborn tone, and I had a feeling that he had no intention of going, before or after her.

She seemed to know that too. By the light of the moon, her expression was exasperated, a mother's annoyance. "Corin," she said.

"No," he said. "This is my place, *enfin*. You and Papa must go. I don't have a need to. No one knows me. And there is…a man must make sure that no innocents are harmed—Surely you understand?"

She shook her head and said, "Take care," and to Alexis, "Look after him." Then she stepped into the craft. The dome closed and the craft went under again.

I expected Alexis to turn and come out of the sea. Then we would have time to talk. At least I hoped so, because I had a lot to say to him.

But he remained very still, and I thought he was waiting for the craft and then…would get into it and go with the doctor. Of course, perhaps he needed to go with the doctor and his wife, to arrange their stay wherever it was they needed to be.

On the other hand, perhaps he meant to run away, abandon the isle after setting whatever plans he'd got started.

The craft came back, the man in it sitting, immobile and impassive, a slight man with dark brown hair. And Alexis turned to me. "Madame," he

said. “If you will.”

“What? No.” I was outraged. “I have come here for a purpose, and I have not fulfilled that purpose.”

Alexis’s homely countenance looked like he was counting backward from three thousand. Slowly. Possibly in Chinese. “Madame,” he said. He turned and advanced out of the sea towards me. “You have to go.”

“No.” I stepped backward up the sand and half hoped he would try to force me, because I was more than willing to show him that I was not his to command. “I came here to save the Good Man and I—”

“The Good Man,” he sneered, his countenance turned ugly. “If you think that the Good Man should be saved by you, you are—”

That was when the voice called out from up on the beach. “Alexis Brisbois. Mailys Bonheur. Doctor Dufort. Madame Dufort. You are under arrest by orders of the Protector of the Republic.”

“Merde,” Alexis said. “Zen, now, please, I beg of you.”

I shook my head.

At the head of the stairs, a man appeared, standing in the full moonlight. He was short, with a haircut that made each of his hairs fall into the exact position to delineate an elegant cranium. Except for the balding up front. And the unmistakable rabbit-quality of his features.

“Alexis,” he said. “Surrender. You know she has a tenderness for you. It won’t go badly for you.”

Alexis’s face did something. I wasn’t sure what exactly, but for just that moment, as his facial muscles contorted and his heavy eyebrows came down over his dark eyes, I wouldn’t at all have been surprised should he have grown enormous fangs or turned into a werewolf. At any rate, he looked as though he’d very much like to acquire a more murderous shape. “I’d like to beat you,” he told me in a vicious whisper. “If I weren’t sure you’d manage to get into even greater trouble, I’d knock you unconscious and stick you in that craft.” Then he moved, just so slightly. I realized he was moving to hide view of the craft from the beach, and he turned towards the figure up on the sea wall, by the stairs. “Jean!” he said. “Are you now her errand boy? Did she threaten to burn your frocks?”

The man took a step back, shook his head. “Don’t play the fool, Alexis. I have ten guards with me. This is no time to be an idiot. Rose said to bring you, and that you had nothing to fear. We understand you were

caught on the Good Man's side, and you had no chance to escape. We understand your natural sympathies are with us."

I saw Alexis's hand go back to the back of his pants. I figured he had a burner hidden there, where the fullness of his doubletlike coat hid a multitude of sins. Still in a whisper, he said, "Run. Left. There's a path out. Keep the children safe."

I had no idea who he meant by the children, and then I perceived that the girl who had guarded the cove for us was knitting herself with the wall, hoping, I was sure, to pass unnoticed. And she was a child, probably well under twenty. And Corin, too, was a child in a way.

I grabbed at his arm. He seemed to resist briefly, but as Alexis said, "My dear Dechausse, you have no idea where my sympathies are or why!"

And then, lightning fast, so fast I could barely follow it, Alexis drew a burner and fired at the man on the wall. And shockingly, unbelievably, the man returned fire. Even as he fired back, I realized he was too intent on Alexis to see us. I ran, holding Corin's arm, to flatten against the wall. Then, pulling at the young woman, I led them both at a fast sort of slide, in the direction Alexis had indicated. As I did, I realized that I'd have been killed by Alexis's first shot. And I was faster than normal people. But then perhaps Dechausse knew Alexis very well and knew what he was likely to do.

My heart hammered in my chest, pushing the blood past my ears with a sound much like the sea. I was trying to move as fast as possible, but not so fast that two normal young people couldn't follow me. To their credit, neither of them protested. They obeyed my pull in silence, even the young woman who knew nothing of me. Corin was the one having trouble keeping up with the speed, stumbling occasionally as I tried to rush him along.

In the confusion, intent on getting the young people to a safe place, I didn't pay attention to Alexis's fight, except for keeping an eye out on the beach, in case the man atop the wall or the men he had with him should come after us.

Alexis seemed to be firing with both hands, and some other men had joined the fight from above the wall—or at least burner rays were coming from multiple places in the retaining wall, lending credit to Dechausse's claim that he had many men with him.

We hit water, and walked sideways into it, trying not to splash or make too much noise, even though I was sure that we couldn't be heard above the zap of the burners. But it also seemed to me that, in the light of the firing weapons, we were fully visible, no matter how closely we knitted ourselves against the wall.

Then, suddenly, something blew up. I couldn't tell where, precisely, but it seemed to me in recollecting the images before the explosion that Alexis Brisbois had taken a grenade from one of his pockets, and pulled the pin.

There was a fountain of sand, a lot of screams and a lot of imprecations. And I realized from some of them that the men from the wall had to be on the beach, having somehow crept there without my seeing them. I grabbed Corin and half threw him into the deep water. Then I threw the young woman. I screamed as they tried to come up again, "Dive, dive, dive."

And then I dove after them, in the dark water, with the pale moonlight filtering through, my lungs bursting with lack of air.

Alexis had said there was a passage here, but I couldn't see one above water, between the dark, artificial rocks, and the retaining wall. So the passage must be under water.

I dove deeper, looking for it.

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Horrible Example

I SWAM DEEPER AND DEEPER, AWAY FROM THE LIGHT. IT FELT AS THOUGH MY LUNGS must burst before my hand—extended in front of me—perceived a break between rock and wall. By feel alone, since it was too dim to see this far down, it was hard to tell if I could fit through, but there wasn't much other choice. The only other choice was to go back to the beach and be shot by whoever had come to arrest Alexis and whoever was with him.

Swimming forward, I could touch rock and wall on either side, but nothing caught. I emerged on the other side, into brighter-moonlit water outside the shadowy little cave, and I realized I must swim upwards or drown. My lungs felt near bursting and at any minute, my mouth would open against my will, trying to get air that simply wasn't there.

I made a rush for it, swallowing three gulps of water before I was clearheaded enough to realize that no, there was no one pointing a burner at me, which of course, was a possibility. It was possible that it was a small detachment and that, as such, it was surrounding the cove only. Or, depending on how badly whoever it was who had sent them wanted to apprehend Alexis and his presumed accomplices, the capturing party could have extended here.

But when I surfaced there was no one there. I'd have seen anyone waiting because there was no beach on this side.

Beaches on seacities were always artificial constructions, at least beaches as they were shown in holos and as people imagined them, with sand leading on to a gentle slope into the ocean. Seacities, poured in dimatough and anchored to the ocean floor in some way I wasn't sure I understood, back in the twenty-first century, were…one piece. There would, I suppose, in time, be sand on their beaches, and their beaches would become graduated as the sea wore away at the dimatough.

But right then and there, unless beaches were constructed and sand flown in, the seacity floor, upon which all construction rested, ended

abruptly at the water's edge. Save for where harbors had been constructed, the most common view of a seacity was as of a black or gray cliff rising out of the sea.

And on this side of the rocks, no one had built a beach. There was the cliff and, at the base of it, the not uncommon bit of a lip, little more than a natural shelf created in the pouring of the dimatough.

I thought that I'd need to swim to it and lie down to rest. After that, I could think of where to go, but first I must be able to think, and I was still shaky from holding my breath so long.

Then I wondered where the two young people were and realized, with a groan, that I might need to swim back and get them.

This was just before two blond heads popped up out of the sea, close to me. The first was Corin's, and he broke the water surface gasping, snorting and coughing, indicating that the holding of his breath had failed sometime before he made it to the air. The second was the young woman who'd been waiting for Alexis, her blond hair streaming water and glued to her head while she blinked. She looked far more composed than Corin.

I caught their eye and gestured with my head towards the shelflike feature. Corin nodded, and when I pulled myself up to the ledge, and sat on it, he sat next to me, and then the girl pulled herself up next to him.

"I beg pardon," I said. "I should have come up to guide you. I was going to see if there was a passage, and by the time I found it, I needed to see if I could get through."

Corin gave me an odd look. "Why should you have come back? We are grownups, and we could find our own way. We did."

I almost said Alexis had told me to look after them, but suddenly realized they might resent the sentiment as well as the fact he'd called them children.

"I think," the girl said, her voice higher. "Alexis told you to get us out of there, didn't he?"

"Who are you?" I asked, taken with the sudden certainty she must be his daughter, or someone he trusted as much. I remembered the name that Dechausse had called down. "Mailys Bonheur?"

She inclined her head. "They call me that," she said.

"And you were working with Alexis Brisbois?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, then suddenly shrugged with the air of a woman throwing it all on the line. “In a way. I was his…secretary,” she said. And as though she thought I’d judge it unlikely, which I did for someone so young, she added, “No, secretary trainee, you see. Clerk in the offices. I barely escaped on the night…the night of the ball. Alexis has been trying to track us down, look after us.”

For reasons I couldn’t imagine, Corin looked stricken. He stared at the young woman then said, “You?” in an accusatory tone.

That seemed to confuse her. She blinked at him. “Yes, why?”

“Oh, nothing at all,” he said.

“I take it you don’t approve of your father’s work?”

Corin groaned. “Ah, papa, papa.”

I thought it was all very strange. Did he mean to imply this young woman had been his father’s lover? It seemed hardly credible. I’d seen the relationship between Doctor and Mrs. Dufort. Perhaps Corin just imagined things? He wouldn’t be the only sensitive young man who endowed his elders with a fantasy life they’d never had.

“I think,” I said, carefully steering the conversation. “That we need to get out of here. They might not think to look for us here, then again they might.”

“Do you think Brisbois killed himself with that grenade?” Corin asked.

“There was no flesh in the spray,” Mailys said, with certainty.

Corin gave her an almost frightened look. “It was too fast to see.”

“No, I saw. There was no flesh in the spray.”

I suddenly felt exactly as I’d felt in the evenings at Len’s parents’ home. He had an older sister who had three teenage children, and when they got to arguing, no matter how stupid the argument, you simply couldn’t stop them.

“Whether he killed himself or not,” I said, “they might, sooner or later, look here. And even if they don’t, we can’t stay on this little ledge the rest of eternity. Surely, Corin, this is not why you stayed behind instead of allowing Brisbois to get you to safety with your parents.”

“No,” he said. “I—Something must be done. I always wanted a revolution, that would, you know, set people free. But they are hurting people. They are hunting them down.”

“This surprises you?” Mailys asked.

“I mean they’re hunting down everyone, not just enhanced people,” he said, in a tone of justification. “They burned down our neighbors’ house just because they thought it was ours.”

“Revolutions,” I said, feeling about three thousand years old, “are not known for calm and precision.”

“But—”

“But you can’t wait to help them?” Mailys asked. “To cleanse the world of those who are genetically engineered with superior traits? Because only after that can you be free? When you know there are no people engineered to be your superiors?”

“I never said that,” Corin protested.

“No? But you applauded it. You’re not totally unknown to me, Corin Dufort. I saw you at one of Madame Parr’s speeches.”

At that point, I was ready to plunge into the sea, even if there were no land anywhere in sight, no matter if I died, just to get away from the bickering children. I understood for the first time why Brisbois had called them children.

I was still not sure what game Brisbois was playing, nor was I reassured about his devotion to Simon, but I knew for a fact now that he was at least trying to gather the palace personnel and keep them safe. Or at least, he’d come for Doctor Dufort.

“Come,” I said. “Corin, how near are we to what might be a safe point to swim to? Or do we have to go back where we came from and pray?”

He chewed on the corner of his lip, thinking. “That way,” he pointed, opposite from where we’d come. “Oh, not very long. Around that bend, and we might find other ledges to rest on along the way. Then we’ll come to a loading dock for the vegetable market.”

“Not the vegetable market,” I said, remembering the explosion, and Simon and the revolutionary guards. “It will be guarded.”

He looked confused. “It’s the closest place, short of going back. And back there, they might have people waiting for us.”

I sighed. “All right.” It occurred to me that perhaps the revolutionary guard had moved on, after going over the place. “We’ll try it. We can always come back.”

We plunged into the water and swam to the place I’d barely escaped with my life before.

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The Civilization Game

THE MARKET FROM THIS SIDE LOOKED TOO WELL LIT FOR US TO SIMPLY GO ABROAD in it. But we pulled ourselves up into a relatively unlit dock. It might very well have been the same at which I'd seen Brisbois talk to a man before it had all exploded. The whole area looked charred, as though by a conflagration. I wasn't sure there had been only an explosion here, though. For all I knew the market had been scoured by fire.

We dragged ourselves out of the water and onto broad flagstones of the loading dock, dripping water and trying to catch our breaths.

Corin scouted ahead and around the edge of the gate. When I looked up from squeezing my hair free of water, he was gesturing for us to follow.

We did, around the molded ceramite tables, and past stalls closed with corrugated metal. We heard footsteps and people, but we didn't see anyone. There were songs and snatches of songs going this way and that. In the dark, in the shadows, it was surprisingly scary, disquieting. It was like listening to the thoughts of the city. The thoughts of the city sung to the tune of popular songs, all of them disturbing and filled with rage; echoing of blood and threats.

We stepped lightly, down the dark paths of the market. Corin took point. I'd guess his male pride required it. But I took care to look ahead myself. I could see farther than he did and likely hear better too, and I made sure I kept us out of trouble. Out of the path of potential trouble, even.

Which is why, when I heard the voices ahead, I half-ran forward, and put my hand in front of Corin, to prevent his going any further. He and Mailys stopped, behind my arm.

"What—" Corin whispered. I put my finger to my lips, and turned so he could see it. Almost soundlessly, I whispered in his ear, "There is noise that way. A crowd. Stay. You and Mailys."

He glared, and I think it was on the tip of his tongue to tell me he didn’t hear anything. I don’t know why he didn’t, but he didn’t. Instead, he nodded once, curtly.

I went ahead of him.

The crowd was in one of the larger areas. It must have been a courtyard. There had been several of those in the market, circular areas surrounded by stalls, all usually dealing in the same sort of goods, so that housewives could have shopped for vegetables or fish, without leaving the area. Now, in the center of one of them, a crowd had assembled. My first thought was how normal they looked. Average. Like everyone else. Except most of them wore liberty caps. And I could smell blood. The blood likely came from a young man—I think it was a young man, though it was hard to tell—standing in front of one of the stalls.

Atop the stall, standing on the little table normally used to display produce, stood a dark-haired, scraggly bearded man. “The people,” he said, “will not tolerate these soi-disant improved people to live. The people,” he said. “Will make this one an example for the others.”

He said a lot of other things, too. And every time he said anything there was applause, and someone struck the young person they held captive.

I didn’t know if he was improved. It’s not something you can smell, or even see, unless you observe someone in action, and in their area of expertise, at that.

What I knew for a fact was that they were tearing him apart. I could smell his blood, and I could hear his cries, the cries of someone grown hoarse from screaming.

I could also hear, and distinguish, the panting breaths, the excited heartbeats of the people surrounding him, the grinding of teeth, the fragments of sentences. “The people.” And “Keeping normal people down.” And “Oppressors.”

Fast breath behind me and I turned in time to see Corin and Mailys. Dear God, she had her burner out.

I moved faster than I had before, and pulled the burner out of her grasp. I turned and grabbed at Corin’s shoulder. I sped them both away.

They protested, both of them, with inarticulate sounds, but I was pulling them too fast, and the crowd was too absorbed in their sadism for it to register. I pushed and pulled the two young people away from the

courtyard. I led them to places where I heard no sounds, no movement, hoping that they were deserted. When we reached the gate, there was no guard in a Liberty cap, which made me wonder what had been different the previous time. I didn't care. I shoved Mailys and Corin out to the street. They were both now fighting my grasp but unable to break from it.

"We must go back," Corin said, as soon as I slowed down enough that he had breath to speak. "We must save him."

"He's dead by now," I said. "And there was nothing we could do for him by the time I saw him, except give him mercy. If there had been a regen tank right next to him, we might have been able to do something, but even then I doubt it."

"How can you know that?"

"I smelled it," I said. "I heard it. I know."

Mailys said softly, "She's right. I did also. I was going to give him mercy." Then she looked at me. "Who are you? You're not one of us."

If I'd put two and two together from what I'd half-heard, I'd have had a pretty good idea that I was, or close enough as would make no difference.

"We'll talk," I said, as I dragged them out, keeping an ear out. Corin looked mulish. Mailys looked puzzled, and I wondered what coil I was caught in this time. Was Corin some sort of anti-enhanced person fanatic? It was difficult to believe, but only because I knew what my husband had been like. However, just because you look like someone doesn't mean you *are* like someone, and I wasn't enough of a child to believe otherwise.

They kept quiet. Mailys put the red liberty cap on her head, and I wondered where she'd got it. I could guess she had preserved it in a pocket while we were swimming around the isle.

We emerged into relatively quiet night streets, well away from the market, and I wondered if we should go back to the hotel. Part of me wanted to, at least for the sake of figuring out where Alexis was, and if he was alive. But no. The chances of his being alive, even if Mailys said there had been no body parts in the spray, were small enough. And I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

Right then, I wasn't even sure if I wanted Alexis Brisbois to be alive or not. I just knew he'd told me to keep Mailys and Corin alive. Or at least I hoped that's what he meant by "children."

It was a small, inarticulate sound from Corin that called my attention. I turned to look where he was pointing. In this street of otherwise unremarkable middle-class townhouses, one looked looted. The door hung crookedly on its hinges. The windows were broken.

I glanced at Corin. “People you know?”

He started to shake his head, then nodded. “Friends,” he said. His voice sounded hoarse. “Of Dad’s.”

“Looks like they were attacked.”

He nodded again, then seemed to make some internal decision, and turned, starting to walk towards the door. I put a hand in front of him. “No,” I said. “No.”

“But I have to see,” he said. “It’s my duty. They might need help.”

I looked dubiously at the house. There was no sign of movement. If there were anyone in that house, they were as likely to be hostile as they were a friend. Of the three of us, I was more likely to be able to escape if there was trouble simply because I was faster and smarter than most normal, nonbioengineered humans. “I’ll do it,” I said. “I have…ways of getting out faster.”

“But if there is anyone in there, they’ll know me!” Corin said.

“And if the people who are in there know you but want you killed?” I asked. “Tell me who lives there.”

“Francois. He’s about thirty years old. Dark hair. His wife is Adelie. She’s blond. Twenty something? Their name is Bonnaire. They have a little girl. She’s three—No, five. Her name is Tieri.”

I nodded. “If I see them, I’ll shout I’m your friend, shall I, and then you can come in.”

I ran towards the house, but stopped at the entrance. It was silent, but that wasn’t the problem. The problem was the smell of blood. Not recent blood, either. I took a deep breath and went in, moving carefully through the shadows.

There was a sound, faint, from a distance, but it didn’t sound like someone in the house. What I mean is it was a sound so distant that it might be coming from a nearby house, or perhaps from outside, in the gardens. No immediate threat to me.

I was in a sort of atrium, and walked from it and around the bottom floor. I found Francois and the source of a great deal of the blood smell in

the kitchen. At least I presumed it was Francois. Someone had decapitated him and the head was missing. There was the stump of bloody neck, but no head anywhere in sight.

I started to turn away when I heard gagging from the left, from an area that I presumed had been a breakfast room.

The burner was in my hand and I put it back in my pocket. The person gagging was Corin. I looked over the counter at where he was. Adelie, too, was missing her head, and a coating of black blood spread over the floor.

Mailys came in, walking cautiously.

“I asked you to wait outside,” I said.

“There didn’t seem to be any danger,” Mailys said.

Corin didn’t say anything. He’d taken off running, and presently I heard him retching. I didn’t hear anything else, except that distant sound. A sound too faint and distant, I was sure, for any normal person to hear.

“There’s someone in the wall,” Mailys said. “That way.”

“In the wall?” It was what I’d heard also, but I didn’t know how Mailys knew it.

“I can’t find Tieri,” Corin’s thickened voice sounded from the entrance to the kitchen. “I mean,” he said and hiccupped. “I can’t find her body.”

I remembered instructions that Simon had given me, once when we were visiting someone on Liberte seacity, and he must have been somewhat worried about the situation. It must have been at the back of his mind. He’d told me all upper-class houses in the seacity had a safe room, disguised as a plain wall, so that occupants could be sheltered from riot or robbery.

I thought the Duforts’ secret…laboratory? It had been rather a grand form of that, but—“Where is their safe room?” I asked Corin.

He had come close and now looked utterly astonished. “Their what?”

“Their safe room,” I said. “There’s someone crying behind a wall.” I walked down a hallway and patted the wall at the end. “This wall.”

“How do you know there’s someone behind the wall?” Corin said.

“Don’t be more of a fool than you can help,” Mailys snapped.

“Oh,” he said, as though this explained everything. “I don’t know where their safe room is. Yes, they probably have one. But if they had time to put Tieri in it, why not themselves?”

“Perhaps they were defending?” Mailys said.

Corin looked doubtful. He shook his head. “They never told me where it was,” he said. “Or how to open it. Or even that they had a safe room.”

Mailys made a sound of impatience as she felt along the wall. She pulled down a tapestry that hung artistically on it and threw it carelessly behind her. Then she ran her fingers down the wall, slowly.

The crying coming from behind it had that sound of despair that comes when a child has been crying for a long time and has despaired of rescue.

I looked at what Mailys was doing. She cast me a glance over her shoulder. “I can’t feel the joining,” she said. “But I can feel a difference of temperature here,” she ran her hand along a line.

She seemed to be looking to me for confirmation, and I went over and felt the difference of temperature too, in a thin crack, something that even the best, tightest joining of a secret door couldn’t prevent. It felt warmer, which made sense. I hoped they had ventilation in the secret room, or the person inside would be running out of air soon. Meanwhile I made a note that Mailys could hear very faint sounds from within a wall, sounds that normal humans—or at least Corin—couldn’t, and that she could feel the subtle differences of temperature at a secret door joining. The indications were that Mailys might be faster, smarter, stronger.

I tabled it for discussion later, and said, “Corin! How old is Tieri? Can she help us get her out?”

“She’s five years old,” he said. “And I don’t know. She…I babysat for them.”

I nodded. I’d felt the joining all around. The entire end of the hallway was a door, the seam around the edge where wall met wall. Mailys was frantically feeling along the length of the wall for a hint of a genlock; an opening, a bump, anything that could activate the door.

I thought that she had that part covered, and also that if I were putting an opening mechanism for a secret door somewhere, I wouldn’t put it on the door itself. So I started looking around, at the walls at right angles to it. Nothing caught my carefully scanning eyes. I turned to the ceiling, which was covered in an elaborate decorative pattern of small plaster roses. I scanned more carefully along the two feet or so of the ceiling. One of the roses seemed somewhat lopsided. I reached up to it and felt it. Yes—there was some sort of mechanism there. Again, the temperature was different from those of the plaster roses about it. And the difference, visually as well

as temperature, was probably something that no normal human being could sense. I felt carefully along the leaf that was slightly fatter than the others and tried for the *give* to see if it moved at all. It did, wiggling in my hand. I felt one way up and then down the other, looking for a way to slide it.

I met with more resistance as I pushed it left than right, so I let it slide right.

There was a sound like two slabs of dimatough rubbing on each other, and suddenly we were looking into a small, spare room. In the middle of it stood a little blond girl, clutching a kitten and crying.

She shrieked when the door slid up, then said, “Corin!” and ran to him. He took her and the kitten struggling in her grasp in his arms, and stood up.

And I remembered the decapitated bodies in the kitchen, and said “Corin, take Tieri upstairs. Make sure she’s all right.” I met his eyes and tried to convey the idea that under no circumstances should the child be allowed in the kitchen. Mercifully, he seemed to get it. “Yes, Tieri—let’s go up to your room and get you more practical clothes. We might have to run. And who is this kitten? Have I met him?”

As their voices went away, I turned to Mailys. “Can you help? Is there some way we can dispose of the bodies and make this house secure?”

She looked at me for a long moment, her eyes wide and doubtful, and I thought she was going to tell me I’d lost my mind, but then she shrugged, and started towards the back. “There is usually a small backyard, perhaps large enough for a grave, if we can find something to dig with.”

There was a small backyard, peaceful in the moonlight. It was as though the intruders had come in through the front door and perpetrated their outrages in the house, without ever coming back here.

A neat little lawn filled most of the back, surrounded by roses, which bloomed with a heady fragrance in the warm air, and there was a pond gurgling in a corner of the garden. And there was a shed, in which we found various implements which left me staring at them in bewilderment.

Look, I understand shovels and picks. We had them in Eden too. But the various mechanical devices left me staring. It is obvious that on Eden and on Earth even mechanics have taken completely different routes to accomplish the same purpose.

I think it is because on Earth they had room for bigger machinery. For instance, I’d not seen a big excavator until I’d come to Earth. On Eden, the

task of digging, even such a huge hole as needed for a housing compound for a large family was achieved by having many tiny robots dig in coordination, according to preprogrammed parameters.

On Earth they had backhoes and excavators. And in the shed at the back of the townhouse's garden, we found versions of those backhoes and excavators, automated and controlled by remote. Though all the landscape looked mature to me, clearly someone had done some serious planting and Earth-moving around here.

Mailys looked at the machinery with pursed lips, and tried out the remotes, then turned to me. "If you help me bring the bodies out, I'll take care of disposal while you clean the floor and secure the front door."

"Do you think we'll be safe here even if I secure the front door?" I asked. There was something to her pinched expression I couldn't quite read.

She nodded.

"But if people are going around looting—"

She shook her head. "It wasn't like that. There is a list…" she pursed her lips.

I felt like the hair was trying to stand up at the back of my neck. There was a something she wasn't saying.

Something in my expression must have given my thoughts away because she sighed. "Yes," she said. "I suppose sooner or later we will have to talk. But right now I don't want to get in an argument with Monsieur Dufort in front of the child. And it will happen if I'm the one inside, securing the house."

Which, having been privileged to watch some of their arguments, made perfect sense to me. I could well imagine what the little girl would make of the things they might say.

So I helped Mailys carry the two corpses outside. She did her share of the lifting, which connected with her other abilities. I was right. I knew it. Biological improvement had continued, or perhaps lines of biologically improved people had been cloned on into the present, perhaps. But what did this have to do with the situation we found ourselves in?

I set about finding cleaners, cleaning the pools of blood from the floor, and disposing of the used cleaning rags down an incinerator. If I hadn't seen real middle-class families before, when Simon and I had visited his nanny, this would all be alien to me. I had the feeling I was somehow caught in a

tangle amid people who knew each other and who had old scores and old paybacks running through the fabric of the revolution, but I wasn't absolutely sure how. And I realized that what I didn't know could kill me. Having cleaned the kitchen, I searched the house for something with which to mend the door.

"What are you looking for?" Corin asked.

"Something to fix or replace the front door," I said.

He looked at me as though I'd grown a second head. I rounded on him. "We can't go running around a city, one in a state of disorder and rampaging murder, in the light of day. We most especially cannot while toting a five-year-old and a kitten!"

He opened his mouth, closed it with a snap. "If Brisbois—"

"If you're going to say that if Brisbois had only waited, you'll have to explain to me what sense that makes, when he couldn't possibly have known this family would need him."

"He knew some…some families would need him," he said. "But I suppose," he added, reluctantly, "that he couldn't be expected to know everyone who would need him in particular, or to make a single trip to rescue every one of them…" He hesitated. "If it's even his objective to rescue every one of them. Which I don't know."

I grew impatient. I'd never known Len at this age. Or rather, I'd known Len at this age, by virtue of our studying in the same general area and in complementary professions. He'd trained as a navigator and I as a pilot. But that wasn't the same as being involved in a relationship, or even spending time dodging death together. When it came to that, I'd definitely not been in that close a contact with him.

Which meant that I was not ready for someone who looked that much like Len to act as a late adolescent male. I'd never had much interest in the breed, frankly, and this one was no exception. "I'm not analyzing what Brisbois might or might not be doing," I told him. "I was taught to take care of my own problems, and as much of other people's as fell within my circle. Right now our problem is to stay safe and keep Tieri safe and, secondarily, to establish a plan of action to…to rescue the Good Man, which is what I came here to do, whether you and Mailys help me or not."

My mission, imposed on me by Brisbois before he sacrificed himself, was to protect "the children," and since I assumed these two were the

children, I was going to follow through.

Corin's face worked. I expected him to deliver himself of some blistering diatribe, but instead, his expression became controlled and dignified. He seemed suddenly much older. "What can I do?"

"Do you have any idea how to repair the door?"

He frowned. "I'll look. There are ways to mend ceramite."

"It would be better if it still looks broken," I said. "So any looters think __"

A tight smile. "I don't think I could make it look whole if I tried," he said and walked off into a room at the back of the house. He came back in moments, with something resembling a gun, but more like a hand-held hair-dryer, with a sack of some sort attached to the grip. I followed him to the front door where, amid what sounded like French curses but no French curses I knew, he set about joining the broken panels of the door with what looked to be newly extruded, still hot, ceramite.

"Tieri?" I asked him, as I pitched in, holding one of the pieces so he could drip ceramite along the break. He somehow managed to get a bit on his finger, yelped, and sucked at his finger, as I made use of my extra speed to grab the implement midair and keep it from dripping ceramite on his legs.

He pulled his finger from his mouth, examining critically a bubble forming on it. "Thanks for catching it," he said. "How about you fix it and I hold up the pieces? I swear, I need to have three arms for this job."

"I don't have three arms," I said.

"No," he said, and frowned a little. "But I think you are enhanced beyond…normal human, aren't you?"

I shrugged, and he seemed about to say something, or ask something. His eyes examined me intently, as if I were some sort of puzzle. But all he said was, "I put Tieri in a bubble bath with toys, and then put her in bed. She was almost asleep. She—" He sighed. "She cried for hours in the safe room. Her father got her in the safe room and got it locked, but I think, though that's not what she told me, that he had some idea of protecting the house. I don't know what happened, exactly. But she heard screams. She was very scared."

"What have you told her about her parents?" I asked.

“That they had to go away a little while,” he said. “And asked me to look after her. That is not unusual enough to make her suspicious. I used to look after her all the time when her parents went to shows or had to go out.”

“Who were they?”

“Family friends.”

“Obviously. Besides that.”

“Francois was the Good Man’s junior trainee accountant,” he said, as though reluctantly.

I frowned. I was still sure this was a targeted attack. It bore all the hallmarks of that, just like the attack on the Duforts had. But why? The doctor of the Good Man might potentially be worth it, but not the junior accountant, surely?

I thought back to the argument between Mailys and Corin, the references to enhanced people and, just now, Corin saying I was surely enhanced. Mailys had intimated he opposed enhanced people. I frowned intently as I fixed the door. We repaired it enough to lock it, and then, after trading a look which meant neither of us was absolutely sure this would be enough, we pushed a tall, heavy display case in front of it, completely blocking the entrance. Even if they—whoever they were—broke through the door, they’d have to break through the display case as well to get to us. Which was good, because I felt like death warmed over after the disasters of the day, and I suspected Mailys and Corin would need to sleep, as well.

When we got done, Mailys was waiting at the inner door to the hall. “I’ve made food,” she said, and added, “Well, not made. Warmed, but…I thought—”

I nodded. Corin said, “I’ll check on Tieri.”

He came back moments later. “She’s asleep with the kitten. I found the kitten’s litter box and moved it to her room. Francois?” he said. “Adelie?”

Mailys made a face and it took me a moment to realize she looked like she was going to cry. “We buried them. In the yard.” She bit her lips. “The—oh, damn.”

Corin looked like he was waging a mighty internal battle, but all that came out was, “I liked them.”

At that an unholy light danced in Mailys’s eyes, and she said, “I’m glad to know you can make exceptions, Monsieur Dufort.”

“You don’t know anything about me, or what I feel and think,” he said. “How can you think—”

“Shh,” I said, gesturing with my hand towards the upper floor where the child slept. “We are going to need to discuss plans and to weigh things openly, and we can’t do that if she’s awake.”

They both nodded.

“First, we need to know what is happening,” I said. “Out there.”

Mailys found a comlink receiver. It was in a sort of living room, with broad, comfortable seats. We carried our bowls of soup and sat down to watch.

When Corin tuned it to the official newscast, we realized it was much worse than we thought.

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Where Evil Dwells

"To make all equal. To banish from Liberte the fetters of inequality! That is what this revolution is about. The ci-devant Good Man, St. Cyr, he is admittedly a biological creation, a non-natural creature who has for many years behaved as though superior to people created by nature and designed —" The woman screaming in the comcast, in what had been the official channel used by Simon for his announcements, was short, curvy, older than I, and had blond hair in a bun at the back of her head. Her blue eyes shone with intense excitement. And she wore what can only be described as a modified military uniform: a red vaguely military-looking tunic, white pants, and a liberty cap. Only the front of her rather ample chest was covered in medals.

I blinked at the medals, shining in the sun. How could she have won any military decorations?

From what I'd overheard, Liberte was rather traditional in its military forces and preferred all-male troops. There had been no big engagement in which the troops of Liberte had taken part. If anything, the engagement that might happen against the remaining forces of the Good Men still in power would take place between the completely untried troops of Liberte and the seasoned troops of the Good Men. So, where had the medals come from?

Then I noticed the man standing behind her, wearing a matching uniform. He wasn't wearing a liberty cap, and the sun glinted off his scalp, revealed by his thinning hair in front. He looked familiar.

"I see Dechausse survived," Mailys said.

"Like cockroaches," Corin said. "Jean Dechausse is hard to kill. I wonder if Brisbois survived as well?"

Mailys made a sound. I wasn't sure what it meant, and it occurred to me not for the first time to wonder how attached she was to Brisbois and in what way.

“Who is she?” I asked. “And how can she have those many medals? Are they military medals?”

“They are medals,” Mailys said, in a low growl. “Likely she awarded them all to herself this morning before breakfast. Madame is like that.”

“Madame?”

“Do you really not know her?” Corin asked, as though this were hard to believe.

“I’ve never seen her,” I said, staring at the cast, and thinking of course, I might very well have seen her, around the palace. One didn’t pay any attention to people who were there in an official capacity: gardeners, cleaners, or even secretaries. I’d likely seen the poor people who’d died in this house as well, or at least there was a chance I’d seen them. But when you’re living in a house the size of Simon’s, with the number of retainers and hangers on around us at all times, it’s hard to remember everyone who isn’t one of the residents. “Who is she?”

“Madame Rose Parr,” Mailys said. “She’s the head of Egalite, a suborganization of the Sans Culottes which is devoted to eliminating all unfair advantages of wealth, power or even inherited characteristics, in the new republic. For years, she’s given speeches at secret meetings, excoriating biological enhancement and denouncing the existence of biologically enhanced people.”

“But I thought there were no…I mean, other than the descendants of biologically enhanced people, there are no enhanced people, are there? Or at least—She can’t oppose what everyone knows has been forbidden for centuries.”

I had the impression Corin and Mailys, being seated on either side of me, had traded a look behind my back. “Oh, can’t she?” Mailys said. “People resent others they know are better than they are, no matter at what, and it’s easy to tell yourself there must still be enhancements going on.”

I didn’t say anything. It wasn’t the time. But I remembered that both these children could keep up with me when I ran, and I suspected that they were both enhanced. Inheritance, or…? I remembered the underground area of the doctor’s home, the bodies in vats.…

There was nothing necessarily incriminating in this. People had been known to grow replacement parts in Eden, which was why the life expectancy was somewhere north of two hundred years. But on Earth all

that type of biological cloning and work was forbidden, because it was an easy step from that to creating enhanced individuals, as had been done in the late twenty-first century. And Earth was determined to prevent the ascension to power of more biolords, or Mules as the common people called them.

But the doctor had grown body parts. And it was a small step from that to growing individuals.

I remembered Brisbois calling the doctor “father.” It was possible, of course, that the good doctor had had a checkered past that involved the siring of children by some giantess, but I doubted it. It was more possible that he had adopted Brisbois.

But all in all, the fact that Brisbois knew of that underground passage and had made it a point of coming back for the doctor and his wife made me wonder.

“She is Brisbois’s wife,” Corin said.

“Ex-wife,” Mailys snapped. “She divorced him when he was in prison.”

I remembered him kissing me. I thought of his tirades against women. Well. If your wife will divorce you when you’re on death row, it’s bound to embitter you a little. At least a little.

I wondered if he was enhanced and if it was hatred for him that had made her anti-enhanced people.

She was still screaming on the com, and I noticed that she was repeating herself. The audience didn’t seem to care. They applauded wildly.

I changed positions to another sofa which allowed me to half recline. It was uncomfortable compared to the sofas in Eden which were bio-based and adapted in temperature and shape when you lay on them. But I was almost used to these lacks in Earth. Almost. So that it only bothered me when I was drifting off to sleep.

I half awoke, disturbed by some noise. Corin was gone from the room. I hoped he was checking on Tieri. At any rate, I trusted him enough, whatever Mailys might say of him, that his absence didn’t surprise or scare me. Mailys was asleep on the other sofa. The com was still on. It showed streets filled with a dancing populace. The old, cruel song of the palace was being sung. Some people carried heads on pikes.

I noticed the voice-announcer was calling it “the glorious people’s” something or other. The word was obscure and my nano implants did not decipher it. Celebration? Dance? Exultation?

Corin rushed into the room, opened a drawer. I awoke completely and said, “What is wrong?”

He shook his head and whispered back, “I’m getting a game to play with Tieri. I’m trying to keep her away from—” He looked at the picture on the com. Then at me. “I’ll come down to check if something is happening that needs us to get out of here.”

“Any word?” I asked.

“From?”

“Your father? Brisbois?”

He shook his head. “I’ll be back.” And rushed back out.

I had the impression of walking in an odd, gray dream, where shapes were meaningless, and everything had nightmare proportions. I fell asleep and momentarily I was back in my ship, with Len, in Earth orbit. He sat the pilot chair, and I stood behind him. He said, “You must be able to save me this time,” and before I could react to it, he turned around and it wasn’t him at all but Simon.

I woke up with a strangled protest in my throat and my eyes prickling as though I needed to cry. I hadn’t cried when I killed my husband. There was no time to feel sorry for myself or for him. It had taken all my ability to limp our ship home to Eden, and by the time I’d arrived I was so tired and so numb that I’d not even cried at his cremation and memorial service, in the garden of his parents’ house. His mother had invited me to live with them. But of course I couldn’t accept. What would the point of that be? I’d always be no more than a memento of Len.

For months, they’d watched me, I suspect in hopes of grandchildren. Len had known our union would not be fruitful. I was too enhanced to breed with normal humans. But he’d never told his parents.

I couldn’t endure their hopes; I couldn’t endure their disappointment. I couldn’t endure seeing Len’s nephews and nieces grow, each with a little bit of him in gesture and word, in look and movement. I couldn’t stand it.

And so I’d turned to my work, and I’d answered gladly the call to go off-world for a good cause. I’d run away from home.

Only to find myself in a perilous situation, with a young man who looked an awful lot like Len, and with another man depending on me. I wondered if Simon was alive; if he knew I'd do my best to save him. He'd sent me away to keep me safe, but did he count on me to come back?

I realized I'd been holding my hands so tightly closed that my fingernails bit into my palms.

I relaxed, taking deep breaths, and became aware that Mailys was awake, sitting up, and staring in frozen horror at the link. Half-glimpsed, behind her, stood Corin, also giving an impression of not noticing anything around him.

I turned to the comlink and it took me a moment to understand what I was watching, because…because I'd never seen anything like it on Eden, nor could I imagine it ever happening on Eden outside of my wildest nightmares.

The scene was a little plaza to the side of the palace. The city had been built with self-conscious, generally "French" architecture, and this plaza looked it, surrounded by tall, stone-built houses with vaguely classical architecture. The houses were probably dimatough, as were the "cobbles" underfoot and the statue of blindfolded Justice in the middle. Whoever built it had seen Paris before the bombing that leveled it, and had set to consciously imitate it.

I'd walked in that plaza before, when all the buildings around it had been filled with shoppers, inspecting clothes and jewelry in the shops, having breakfast at the small cafes whose chairs spilled to the sidewalk, and strolling around the statue.

Now the statue made a strange background—twice as large as life, her eyes blindfolded, a scale in her hand—against which a motley group of people assembled.

Someone had built a platform. It was square and seemed to have been made of imperfectly smoothed black ceramite or perhaps dimatough, except dimatough seemed too expensive for the purpose.

The purpose was…Proof that the Sans Culottes had in fact read their history and had decided to pay it homage. The contraption puzzled me for a moment, consisting of two large poles with what seemed like a bar of light running across the top.

Then a man I recognized as the Jean Dechausse that Brisbois had tried to kill, and whom he might have emulated himself in the process, announced, “Monsieur Professeur de la Fontaine, et Madame de la Fontaine!”

Two people were pushed forward. They weren’t bound and, in fact, were holding hands. The husband was making an ineffective effort at pushing his wife behind himself, but there were five or six burly men in liberty caps surrounding them, and at least two had hands on their shoulders.

The couple was forced forward, forced to kneel, heads down.

The bar of light descended from the top and…their heads rolled. The crowd shouted *“Ça ira!”* and the song about setting the world on fire erupted again. I stared, not believing it, as the two bodies, still bleeding and twitching, were pushed from the platform, the heads grabbed by young women waiting at the base of the platform, who held them aloft with screams of glee.

“Et Monsieur Jean-Michel Amonette.”

A dark-haired man with a well-trimmed beard, wearing the uniform of Simon’s clerks, was pushed forward, forced to his knees, and the blade fell.

Glee and screams of *“Ça ira!”*

I realized I was sitting immobile, rigid, thinking this couldn’t be true. This had to stop.

The people dancing on the screen looked not like humans but like blood-drunk demons who had lost every shred of humanity.

“Madame Pascal!” A blond woman in a dress that looked like something she had worn for the ball Simon had given, the ball interrupted by the revolution.

Her impeccably coiffed head had barely been gripped when the announcement went up, Dechausse sounding like a valet at a society party,

“Etienne Robert D’Blogg.” Kneel, slice. *“Ça ira!”*

“Monsieur at Madame Landry.” They were also in party clothes and must have been among the notables of Liberte. Kneel, slice.

Monsieur Joseph Capdepon, Francois Fleming, Verite Romaine, Jason Delong, Elisabeth Piedligere, Etienne Louis, Monsieur et Madame Vert, Madame Clithero, Monsieur Laurence Michel, Monsieur Marc Algeres.

Push forward, slice, heads lifted aloft.

Mailys found her voice first. Her croaked *"Mon Dieu"* seemed to wake me from a stupor.

"What is happening?" I asked. "What is this?"

Corin jumped up suddenly and hurried across the room to turn off the com. He stood, shaking. When he turned to face us, he no longer looked nineteen but like he had aged through a long ordeal. "One reads," he said, "about the revolution and how the aristos were killed by the guillotine and the righteous fury of the aggrieved, downtrodden peasants. But…Why are they doing this?"

"What is it exactly? Do either of you know? Did either of you watch the beginning?"

Corin nodded. He sounded hoarse as he spoke. "I came into the room. You were both asleep. Dechausse…" his voice failed him and he made a sound part clearing of his throat, part hiccup. "He said all these people had been captured either in the palace of the ci-devant Good Man St. Cyr. They were all his servants and all enhanced and now they would pay for their years of good living on the backs of the poor." He took a deep breath. "I thought they were going to…to fine them or something. But then the platform came out and the machine, and there…the crowd was already there and…" He covered his face with his hands.

Mailys got up and went to him. I'd seen them fight, and I'd seen them as a couple of squabbling children, but now she put an arm around his waist, and as he brought his forehead down to rest on her shoulder, he was every child, every young man, and she the mother-of-all-living consoling him.

She made sounds at the back of her throat, the sounds women make to children and wounded animals.

The ringing of the comlink echoed in the house, startling us all.

I was the first to reach it, fumbling and trembling, till my fingers found the button that accepted the call.

The link came on as a communicator instead of a broadcast unit, and a young bearded man looking like he'd slept rough, his eyes rimmed with red, his dark hair standing on end, stared at me in stupefaction.

"Who are you?" he said.

He was wearing what looked like the remains of a uniform of Simon's guards. Its red fabric was tattered, the golden trim hanging in pieces, but it

looked like it.

“Zenobia Sienna,” I snapped, thinking it was easier.

“You don’t—” he started, then his eyes widened. “I do believe you’re telling the truth.”

“Yes,” I said. “Who are you?”

“Jonathan LaForce,” he said, and saluted, which I didn’t think was strictly appropriate. “I’ve been trying to reach the Bonnaires, Madame, do you know where they are?”

Corin spoke up then, from the side. “They’re dead, Jon. All but Tieri. She’s upstairs asleep. We arrived after they died. She was sealed in the safe room. Crying.”

LaForce’s mouth opened, but it didn’t look like he was trying to speak. It was more like he was trying to process unbelievable information. He said something. Might have been “*Mon dieu.*” He swallowed hard. “I was hoping to be in time. I’ve been calling the others. There is no answer. No answer from your home, Corin. It was the first on the list.”

“The list?” Mailys joined in.

“Ah. *Alors*, Mailys. Why are you wearing that horrible cap?”

She put her hand up to touch the liberty cap, which she’d clearly forgotten she was wearing. “Brisbois gave it to me. He said it would help. Seems to have. What list are you speaking of?”

“I found it in Brisbois’s office. There was a data gem. The only data I could get from it was a partial list, headed with your father’s name, Corin. And then there were…others of us. I thought…I thought if I’d got the list then someone else must have. The office had been ransacked. So I thought —”

“You thought you would save those you could save?” Mailys said.

He nodded. “Now I don’t know what to do.”

“Where are you?” Corin said.

“In the old guard rooms,” he said. “The ones—Ah, you won’t know. Mailys will.”

Mailys nodded.

“I don’t know what to do,” Jonathan LaForce said. “A man is trained to fight and to guard the weak, but this…One can’t fight a mob. Did you know they’re conducting executions in the Place D’Harmonie?”

Corin nodded. “I saw them.”

“I can’t fight an entire blood-maddened mob,” Jonathan said, obviously frustrated with this fact.

“No,” Corin said.

I took a deep breath. “Can you come and join us?” I asked. “Is it possible? I think perhaps we can do something, if we plan.”

He looked dubious, but after a while nodded, curtly. “I can come. I shall knock like this.” He made a rhythmic knock on the wall next to him.”

“Come by the back door, though,” I said.

“You have to,” Corin said. “The front door is blocked with a display case.”

LaForce frowned, but nodded. And the link went blank.

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Rebellion

WHEN JONATHAN ARRIVED, WE WERE LOOKING THROUGH THE FOOD STORED IN THE fridge portion of the cooker. Cookers on Earth were baffling. There were two kinds: the very cheap ones that just heated things, and then the complex ones that you needed a degree to program. I was used to the cookers on Eden, where you chose what you wanted to eat, and it was delivered to you. This cooker was the one you needed a degree to program. Which was a problem, since the only prepared food needing only to be heated had been consumed at our other meal.

The cooker contained frozen steaks, frozen fish, frozen vegetables, and, in the refrigerated compartments, fresh vegetables. All of which were useless, since we had no idea how to cook them.

Corin flung the freezer closed and said, “I suppose we could always light a fire in the backyard and cook meat over it, like savages.”

“Not the backyard, Corin, no,” Mailys said in a fainting voice. “The graves!”

He looked contrite. “No.”

And that’s when the knock at the door came, in the code LaForce had showed us. Even so, Mailys looked through a spy hole in the door, before opening, and I had my burner out and pointed at the man as he came in.

Jonathan LaForce was, as the com had shown, dark-haired and bearded. What the com had failed to show is that he was also intimidating. Despite not being nearly as tall as Brisbois, he gave the impression of being at least that tall, perhaps more.

He came in, his hair on end, and from the moment he entered the room, he somehow distorted the space around him and took charge.

It started with his sheepish grin at my burner pointed at his belly. He said *“Alors,”* smiled again, and then, without seeming to care that I was

still pointing the burner at him, he asked Mailys, “I wonder if I could use the fresher? And do you have any food?”

Corin snorted. “Food enough, if we can figure out how to use it.

LaForce cast a look at the stove. “Oh, an Elite 55? We have the cheaper model at home, but it works pretty much the same. Don’t worry about it. If I can use a fresher, first?”

I put my burner away. If he was just going to ignore it, there wasn’t any point. I could pull it out fast enough anyway, should he get funny, and until then it clearly wasn’t intimidating him or putting him on his best behavior. If he was a hostile, after all, I’d have to count on my ability to shoot him suddenly.

Mailys conducted him to one of the guest rooms on the bottom floor. He emerged impossibly fast, looking like a new man. He looked clean and his newly combed hair was still beaded with water. He’d trimmed his beard. He wore a dark blue tunic and pants, both of which stretched so much over his frame that it was obvious they’d been tailored for someone much smaller. Philip, I assumed, or maybe the Bonnaires, had kept spare guest suits.

Corin had gone upstairs to get Tieri, who came down holding his hand, followed by the little kitten. LaForce looked sad, and then talked to the child, asking her about the kitten. In moments she was prattling on about how she’d found him in the backyard just before Maman had called and told her that she had to go in the little room, so Tieri had taken the little cat in the room with her.

“But he doesn’t have a name yet,” she said. “I was thinking of calling him Soleil.”

“For his being gold?” LaForce asked and picked the little girl up.

“Yes. But I’ll ask Maman what to call him when she comes back. Will she be long?”

“She has important work to do,” LaForce said. “What do you like to eat, *ma petite*? And what should we feed this little cat?”

Moments later, he’d cooked a plate of chicken and corn for the little girl, and he was setting a plate of plain cooked fish in front of Soleil.

Then he busied himself at the cooker again. This time it took longer. Tieri, done with her food, asked to go play. Play—we checked as we were afraid she’d turn on the com—was to take place in the playroom/nursery at

the end of the house, where she had her dolls and toys that I couldn't even understand. When we escorted her there, she showed us the dolls and also three different construction games.

She seemed disappointed we didn't wish to stay and play with her, though Corin told her he would perhaps be able to after we ate.

Back in the kitchen, we sat down while Jonathan LaForce dished out a gourmet meal of steak, lightly seared and still rare inside, potatoes in butter, and a vegetable medley to which he'd added herbs and spices.

I realized I was ravenous. The food we'd eaten earlier had barely taken the edge off my hunger. If I hadn't been so worried, I'd have been aware of starving earlier.

We sat at a round table, as Jonathan put plates in front of the three of us, before taking a plate for himself.

He ate as bluntly as he did everything else. Not exactly with bad manners, but giving the impression that he had no time for flourishes or even much conversation.

We each drank what we fancied from the stock in the house, in my case a dark beer.

"And now," he said. "I suppose you want to ask me questions, Madame? I suppose that's why you asked me to come here?"

I nodded to him, then looked at Corin, who got my question without my asking it. He went down the hall to the playroom and tiptoed back to tell us she was well enough entertained.

"*La pauvre petite*," Jonathan said. "I'll take her to my wife, I think. One more in our brood won't make a big difference. And she's young. She'll forget."

"Your wife…" Mailys said. "She's safe?"

"Oh, yes. I've arranged for her to hide as…" He shrugged. "She and the children are safe, and I'll take Tieri Bonnaire to her after dinner, if no one objects." His eyes softened in a way I hadn't thought possible. "We can always afford another child. Or at least, well, someone has to look after her, and my wife will love her like our own."

Since both Mailys and Corin, who had trouble agreeing that the sky was blue, seemed to think this was a great idea, I nodded, then said, "You said you had a list of people like…us? You? What did you mean?"

He looked from me to Corin and Mailys.

Mailys shrugged. “I’d never heard of her, but she is one of us. Has to be, or she wouldn’t have been able to keep up with us when we escaped after Brisbois was—After he tried to kill Dechausse.”

“Ah,” LaForce said. “But Madame Parr is also one of us.”

“Yes, but…” Corin cast me a confused look. “Zenobia helped us defeat the people besieging our house. Besides, Brisbois trusts her.”

I was at a loss to think what part of my interaction with Brisbois had given Corin the impression I was trusted, rather than merely tolerated.

At any rate, all LaForce said was, “But Brisbois is missing. And you were…ambushed?”

Corin sighed. “She did refuse to take the rescue trip out of here. But so did I.”

I could probably shoot them all, or at least two of them before they even realized what I was doing. My hand was in my pocket, clenched around the burner. But I didn’t press the trigger. Dead, they’d be no use to me.

I needed to find out where Simon was, and figure out a way to rescue him. I needed to find my way around this bewildering city. I needed allies. And besides, if I shot them all, I’d become responsible for Tieri. I didn’t see myself dodging crazy revolutionaries all over town, while saddled with a child and a kitten. There were limits to even my self-delusion.

I made a quick calculation. It had been important for me to not tell anyone—other than Simon, who already knew—about Eden, about how I’d come to be here and about what I was.

Partly it was a habit of secrecy engrained in my people. When their ancestors had left Earth to found Eden, it had been important to keep Eden secret. It still was. As had been proven when Athena Hera Sinistra’s loss had caused the Good Men to start ambushing the darkships.

So, our pilots and navigators kept all data in their heads and were prepared to kill themselves if captured. Which was why I’d killed Len and left Earth orbit as fast as I could, to avoid being interrogated or having Len at their mercy, because his only hope was regen and that would necessitate surrendering. After which I’d have no control over what happened, and neither would he.

Eden had maybe a hundred thousand people. I didn’t know if anyone had counted lately. Maybe it was as many as half a million. At any rate, as

inhabitants of a small asteroid on an eccentric orbit, we had neither the population nor the material resources to fight a war with a planet whose population topped five billion.

No. Keeping secrecy was not a matter of paranoia. And yet…

My fingers played with some spilled salt on the table, as Jonathan LaForce looked at me and said, “Well, Madame? Who are you, where do you come from, and why should we trust you? I know you look somewhat like the Patrician’s special guest, and you might even be her, with some appearance modifications, but that doesn’t stop the possibility that you might also be a traitor. It wouldn’t be the first time that a Patrician took a bed partner who killed him or betrayed him.”

“I was not the Patrician’s bed partner,” I said, and realized I’d started with the most irrelevant part of my answer. “My name is Zenobia Sienna, though if my world had followed the same marriage naming rules as most of Earth, I’d be Zenobia Dufort.”

Corin let a small sound escape and I looked towards him. “My husband’s unmarried name—men change their name in my homeland—was Dufort and he looked somewhat like you, though older…Of course older. Not so much when we married, but—” But when he’d died. I couldn’t say it.

Corin shook his head. “Was he from the continents? We’re the only Duforts in…”

“You know about the *Je Reviens*?” I asked. “The big, said-to-be-interstellar ship, in which the Mules left with their few remaining servants.”

“Pah,” LaForce said. “That legend. Every historian agrees it’s a myth, designed to allay the collective guilt for killing the rulers and a lot of innocents.”

“Every historian is wrong then,” I tilted my head sideways, trying to delay the inevitable, and at the same time trying to force out words that my better judgment was dubious of my pronouncing. “The Mules did leave on the *Je Reviens*. A hundred and some Mules, led by Jarl Ingemar. They took with them as many of their servants as they could gather on short notice. I understand the time of departure was put forward, and that meant that some of the people who would otherwise have been on board were left behind. Many died. That weighs heavily on the minds of those in Eden. We hold a remembrance day every year.”

“Eden?”

“It’s…a—a colony in the solar system. Forgive me. I can’t say more.”

Corin’s eyes opened wide. “The darkships. The darkship thieves. They aren’t a myth?”

“No,” I said. “My husband was a pilot. I was his navigator. Both of us were bioed for our functions. He was hit with radiation from an exploded powerpod when the tractor beams from Circum Terra seized our ship. He got too high a dose of radiation. My only hope of saving him was to surrender, and I suspected if I did they’d not expend the needed effort to cure him. The only thing surrendering would do was to get me captured and interrogated by every means at Earth’s disposal. So I shot him and took the ship back home alone.” My voice became expressionless as it usually did when I was talking of Len’s death. It was easier to recite it as a learned lesson than to see, to remember—

“And yet you’re back again?” LaForce said.

“We needed to come back, myself and…and some other people to…to find something needed at home, and we did. I chose to stay behind.”

“Why?” Corin asked.

“Unless you were involved with the Patrician,” LaForce said.

I shook my head. “It’s hard to explain. Let’s say the pressure at home was great towards my remarrying and would have grown greater still with time. My skills and my biological enhancements, in my culture, are used as part of a married couple, and I…had no intention of remarrying. I couldn’t imagine falling in love or even getting attached to someone else that way again, and then not being able to save him. But there were other reasons.”

“So you’re saying you’re descended from the servants of the Good Men who left in the *Je Reviens*?” Corin asked. “It was family legend that a great-uncle had gone, but we always wondered if he’d just gotten killed, only—” He stopped.

“The Duforts are an old family in Eden, my homeland.”

“But,” Corin said, and stopped and cleared his throat. “But, you see, when we say you’re one of us, we don’t mean descended from enhanced people. While Madame considers everyone like that an abomination, too, given the promiscuous way enhancements were used in the later twenty-first century, I’d say practically everyone is descended from them, no? The pure human beings she imagines don’t exist, do they? But that’s not what

we meant. We meant we, the people here, the three of us, and Tieri too; they more than I, maybe, were genetically enhanced, on a personal…first generation level."

I could read the hurt in his words, see the expectation of recoil and disgust in his eyes, and all I could do was sigh and say, "No. I didn't mean that. My late husband was just descended from enhanced people. Other… other people on Eden too, but I am the…The easy way to say this would be to say I'm a female clone of Jarl Ingemar, the leading Mule on the *Je Reviens*. That's not true of course. I'm the modified version of what Jarl Ingemar would be, were he female, and our genetics are close enough to fool the less discriminating genlocks, but it's not exactly like being a clone. More like being his sister."

Corin nodded. "Like Athena Hera Sinistra. She was said to be one such. A fertile Mule. One who could…reproduce with any of the male Mules, the…the Good Men, now. And we know who Jarl Ingemar is. He's living in this colony then, with the other Mules?" His eyes were narrow and I didn't know why.

It didn't seem to be something that needed to be kept secret, nor did I attempt it. "No," I said. "The Mules left in the *Je Reviens*, after dropping us, dropping their servants off. All except Jarl Ingemar and Bartolomeu Dias, who stayed behind with the merely enhanced people. Doctor Dias is still alive, but…but Jarl Ingemar is now dead."

His eyes were still narrowed at me. "So you're one of them, a…a Mule?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly. I'm not quite sure why I was made, but it had more to do with making two old men happy—I mean the Mules who stayed behind in Eden—than with being a perfect ruler. I was not taught anything needed to take charge. I'm just Zen Sienna, a navigator of darkships, and since Earth has no need for those, I suppose I'm an unemployed navigator of darkships, now. Someone…I'm just one of the Patrician's friends. He was very kind to me, a stranger on Earth, and I cannot let him die."

Jonathan LaForce sighed. "How do we know that? That you're a private individual who wishes to be of help to the Good Man?"

"Because I told you?" I asked, bewildered.

He shook his head slightly. “You could be…a scout? An advance force for the Mules, when they left in the *Je Reviens*.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “Some advance force,” I said. “It’s just me. I spent six months as guest of the Good Man, doing nothing but enjoying his hospitality.”

“But…perhaps you were lying low? Waiting to get your bearings? So the Mules could take over the world?” It was Corin, and he looked like he was convincing himself of the possibility as he spoke.

Mailys cackled. “You *have* listened to Madame,” she said, in a tone of great appreciation.

“Shut up, you,” he said. “I’ve not. I don’t think all modified people are evil, though *she* certainly is. I was keeping an eye on her, that’s all. But the idea that the Mules who are now the Good Men, and who are superior to creatures on Earth, might want to take over, to—to reduce us to slave populations or worse, is not really that far-fetched. Throughout history, more fit populations have replaced less fit ones. The Mules are better able to survive than we are. If they could reproduce, they could overtake the Earth.”

“That is exactly the same reasoning Madame uses to say everyone who is enhanced in any way should be killed,” Mailys said.

“It is not at all—”

Jonathan LaForce and I traded a look that said, *children,* and he bellowed, “Quiet.” He looked back at me. He smiled a little. “So you’re not here on collective objectives. I’ll believe that. But why are you here, then?”

I shrugged. “To escape Eden where enough people knew or suspected, or would eventually find out, I was the clone of Jarl Ingemar. If you know of the man, you know the expectations that come with it. But I’m not Jarl. I’m Zen. All I want to do is live a small, private, quiet life.” I was silent about my suspicions as to why and how my brother, Kit, and I had been created, and also on how being Jarl’s clone had almost gotten Kit killed. Call me a coward. I wasn’t willing to be killed just because I was the female version of someone who’d died when I was too young to remember him, and with whom I’d never had more than the contact every one of my generation did: a man in a historical study, a hologram in historical recreations.

“And for this peaceful retreat you chose Liberte, balancing on the edge of a revolution?” He grinned mirthlessly. “Well done, indeed.”

“Alors,” Mailys said, softly. “She couldn’t have known we were on the verge of a revolution. We, ourselves, didn’t know it. We thought the Patrician could bring us in for a soft landing. He would have, too, if Madame hadn’t been undermining his influence with the Sans Culottes for years, and if he had the type of power he thought he had.”

LaForce snorted. “Brisbois told him of the danger. He told him several times.”

“Yes, but Brisbois has a gift for rubbing people the wrong way,” Corin said.

“Yourself included, I suspect.”

Corin laughed. “A few times. Though he respects Father, and I’m probably indebted to him for getting Mother and Father out of trouble and so…”

Something dropped at the back of my head and suddenly I knew, with absolute certainty what I was looking at. “You were all made by Doctor Dufort!” I said. “I mean.” I looked at Corin. “Of course, you are his son, but that’s not what I meant. He made you—enhanced you—in a lab.”

Corin hissed out air between his teeth and looked at me, as though shocked. “But of course, I told you. The locals call him Doctor Moreau.”

“Doctor…?”

“Oh, it was the jeering nickname for Doctor Dufort,” LaForce said, derisively. “Employed by Madame’s followers. After an old legend of a doctor who created monstrous creatures, half human, half animal. It’s not like that, of course, but yes. He created us and the Bonnaires and…and most of the Good Man’s servants. He or his father before him.”

“But,” I said, slowly. “Most of the servants of the Good Men are hereditary families. That means their children are natural, no? The parents might be enhanced but the children are naturally born, like Tieri.”

Mailys sighed, and Jonathan shook his head. “Yes and no,” he said. “That is, we all have parents, yes, but you see, when some of us were enhanced, even though it wasn’t as…as it was with…with Brisbois, we still were given characteristics that…that made us ideal for the Good Man’s service.”

“But you’re his son!” I protested looking at Corin.

“And expected to follow his legacy,” Corin said. “Yes. Like my father, and his father before him, I was expected to be a genius at my occupation, to be able to run the laboratory all on my own, to be able to keep up with all the new breakthroughs and to keep things going. And no, I’m not trained yet. Not significantly. But what father who can do it would refrain from making his son a little faster, a little smarter, and a little more able to resist illness? Mind you, ma’am, most of it is done by viruses introduced to the mother at crucial periods of gestation.”

“That’s how we do it too,” I said. “With navigation skills and with the special eyes that allow our pilots to see in the dark. It’s just very expensive, because it requires careful watching.”

He nodded. “Yes, but…there’s also people who are assembled, molecule by molecule and protein by protein in the lab. It starts with human genetics, but each one is selected individually. They’re not Mules. Or at least I suppose they aren’t, because the Mules took entire teams of dedicated people, and each of them worked only on this their whole lives. Of course, that was over four hundred years ago, and we’ve learned some new things, but we’ve also lost much in the way of knowledge and technology. So I don’t know if those people are Mules. They are technically like the Mules—the Patricians—in that they are created to be able to reproduce and to be as fast, as smart, as capable as they can be created.”

“Brisbois?” I said, trying to absorb this. I thought of those rough features, the prominent brow, the way he could keep up with me when I was running, the way he’d dragged me out of that ballroom unscathed.

“And Madame,” Mailys said, in a resigned tone.

“But why?” my voice came out almost whining.

“Because all the secret service of Monsieur…of the Patrician…the Good Man were created especially,” LaForce said. “His…his father…his…the Good Man before him, he didn’t trust anyone who wasn’t enhanced in the same way he was. He thought there was a natural enmity between what we’ll call Mules and what we’ll call, for lack of a better term, normal humans, which we still count as, even if enhanced. So he wanted his very own bodyguards, his secret service, the people close to him to be like him.”

“Then they’re not Mules,” I said. “Because those were all male.”

Corin shrugged. “I’m not exactly fully trained, Madame, but I know that it’s safer to create males and females and impair the reproductive

abilities of both, than to create males only and count on them not being able to make females of their kind." He looked me up and down. "I believe your existence shows those hopes were misguided."

"But it took centuries," I said, then thought better of it. "Or at least I think so. It's what I was told, and what—" I stopped.

"Yes," Mailys said. "From what I understand, we're not done that way. Oh, I should…I mean I was raised by foster parents, because the doctor didn't want me to be known as one of his, but I am like Brisbois and Madame. I am still too young but I was training to be…I was Brisbois's trainee. To replace him. His…" She blushed dark. "His adopted daughter, you might say."

I looked at Jonathan. "And you? You were in his office? You were wearing the uniform of the Good Man, you—"

"I am common as muck," he said. "Oh, enhanced, sure, but not so enhanced that I was considered a danger to the human race if I reproduced. And my wife is not, that I know, any more enhanced than anyone else."

He sighed and tapped his fingers on the table. "You see, you're dealing with two Good Men and two very different sets of policies. The Good Man before the current Good Man didn't trust anyone in his guard who wasn't enhanced the same way he was. He was, you could say, the counterpart of Madame, who proclaims to all and sundry the wonders of natural humans, those who have not had their genes tampered with. He thought the only trustworthy people were those as enhanced as he was. Only he found that wasn't precisely true. I'm not exactly sure what happened or when, but… but Brisbois and Madame turned on him. Perhaps he took Madame into his bed." He shrugged and looked at my appalled expression. "I don't know, understand. I'm just speculating. At the time I was just a very young man and training to be in the defense forces, not…not in the palace guard as such. I just know something must have happened, because Brisbois made an attempt against the Patrician and it came out he was working with the Sans Culottes and so was Madame and Jean Dechausse, perforce, and then—" He shrugged. "Their attempt against the Good Man failed and they were all imprisoned. The Good Man condemned them to death. And then—" He expelled air between his teeth in a long and expressive hiss. Most of what it expressed was his frustration, though I wasn't sure with what. "And then someone made an attempt against the late Good Man. Some people say it was his son, and this is possible, but we don't know for sure. What we

know is that, whatever happened, it caused the Good Man to be brain damaged, unable to exercise his power of government, and his son succeeded him. He then went into death row and saved Brisbois, making him head of his security force. But unlike the previous Good Man, Simon St. Cyr didn't want…" He said a word I didn't understand, clicked his tongue and said, "Men without a mother in his security force. He thought, and perhaps…well, he thought that those who had been created in a lab, gestated by a surrogate and brought up by foster parents who were hired to raise them, were not the most stable of people. I don't intend to dispute it, though some people say none of us are very stable, and neither are most natural born people.

"At any rate, he picked enhanced but not as powerful as possible guards. And he set them to work under Brisbois. Mailys was, I think, the only one created like Brisbois in the force, and that was because she was considered Brisbois's daughter. But the rest of us…the rest of us were just enhanced, not made. Still we were a fraternity of sorts. Each of us knew the others, and each of us knew we weren't quite like other people, and that meant we trusted each other more."

"So that was the list you were talking about," I said. "Everyone in the guard."

"Oh, no, no, no," he said. "Everyone enhanced. All of the creations of Doctor More—" He looked at Corin. "Of Doctor Dufort. We all went to him for treatment when needed, because he had files and he knew about all of us, including the secrets of how we were made and exactly what each of us was capable of." He opened his hands. "Even people like the Bonnaires, who were clerks in the Good Man's administration."

He stopped then, because Tieri had come from the playroom, cuddling the kitten. "I heard noises outside," she said.

We traded a look, and Jonathan got up. He picked Tieri up and deposited her unceremoniously, kitten and all, on Corin's lap, before he slid down the hallway. I didn't care if I or Mailys were more enhanced than he was, Monsieur LaForce did a pretty good imitation of a cat who didn't wish to be seen, moving down the hallway soundlessly, knitting with the shadows.

The rest of us were left sitting at the kitchen table. Corin, absently, petted the kitten, but even Tieri had ceased speaking. It was as though all of us were straining to hear some noise. I thought of how Corin had survived

the attack on his parents' house, and knew he would be listening for warnings that we were in for a second attack. And the rest of us? I didn't know what Mailys had survived, or what attacks she'd experienced, but I knew that my life had taken too many unexpected turns lately for me to be sanguine in the face of a potential threat. So I watched and waited, listening for a sound of disaster: an explosion, the sound of a breaking window.

What we got instead was Monsieur LaForce coming back, cat-footed, and sliding back into his chair, sliding his burner on the table in front of him. The burner was good quality, I noted, better than the burners Simon's guards had carried. I could see the settings from narrow cutting to total burn. He had it on total burn, and he had the safety off. It seemed foolhardy near a child, but then I realized LaForce had his eye on the child and was watching her carefully. I stopped paying attention to the burner and looked at him. He shrugged. "It could be," he said. "There could be someone scouting around the house. You see, Madame managed the attack on the palace," he said. "And I think the main reason was to get the list I found in Brisbois's files. I'm sure he had it locked, but doubtless, having been married to him, she knows him very well. At least, she had somehow unlocked it," he shrugged. "And so I assume all of us are in danger, all of us have had assassins sent against us."

"Because she hates modified people?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Because she knows we know she's also one. After her appeal to the natural people, if such exist in any of the seacities, she can't reveal herself to be more enhanced than any of them, can she?"

"Could we reveal her as such?" I asked.

"Corin, maybe, or Doctor Dufort," he said. "No one else. Which is why she tried to eliminate the whole family. But still, you know, if it's one or two of us saying it…but if it were a crowd, and there were files."

"Yes, I see," I said, and I sort of did, though the politics of a land this big and with so many people seemed bewildering at the best of times. Something he'd said bothered me. "Would you say, honestly, that the objective of raiding the palace was to get the list? Not to imprison the Good Man?"

He pursed his lips. "I suppose that is possible," he said, "though I suspect she never thought she could do it. I mean, the Good Man is not that easy to capture. None of them are. People have tried for centuries."

It occurred to me with sudden clarity that while he knew Simon was made, a Mule and a clone of the last Good Man, he had no idea what made him different from the other Good Men. He didn't know that for centuries the Good Men had their brains transplanted into the bodies of their putative sons. The previous Good Man, Simon's *father,* had done that over the centuries. And he might have, with the experience of centuries, been a hardy survivor, difficult to kill. But Simon was my age and inexperienced in all these games.

I thought of him throwing me at Brisbois, telling Brisbois to get me out of there, to get me out of danger. I thought of Brisbois who had tried, as hard as he could, to take me to Olympus and keep me there and safe. Now Simon, who had turned his last moments of freedom to taking care of me and not himself, was imprisoned, and Brisbois, who had tried so hard to keep me away from this madhouse, was probably dead. At least, I didn't see how anyone could survive what had happened on the beach. And I was here, in the middle of the madhouse. And no one was going to save Simon but me. If I could figure out how to do it.

LaForce was still talking. "I think she was so surprised at capturing the Good Man that she doesn't know what to do with him. But…I don't know if you've looked at the com."

"Only the…the…trials…or the…" I looked at the young girl, and searched for a word that she would not understand, and thought maybe, just maybe Jonathan LaForce knew enough history. "Madame la Guillotine."

"Oh, yes, that. That's on most channels, yes, but there are others, though perhaps you need to know how to tune the com to get the frequencies from outside Liberte. Particularly the ones from Olympus."

I raised my eyebrows at him, in silent questioning.

"The armies of the Good Men are moving into position," he said. "Strategically. Around the isle."

For a moment, I felt Simon's arm around my waist, and heard his voice telling me those were just for show. "Simon," I said, my mouth dry, and then corrected. "The Good Man said that those were for show, that they were likely empty, that if they hadn't been empty they'd already have attacked, that—"

"Ah, that," Jonathan LaForce said. "That for sure. It was all a show of force without actual force. The Good Men were committing as many of

their forces as they could to the fight with the Usaians of Olympus and its territories. They had nothing left for a true show of force. But the situation has changed. To take Liberte while we were governed and unified, while the defense troops were in place; while the Good Men's secret service operated, they were going to need a lot of men." He made a sweeping gesture with his hands. "Now? While we're fighting and killing each other? Some people, after these last two days, after what Madame has done, would rather kill other people of Liberte and side with the armies of the Good Men. Whatever they were before, now the Good Men promise stability and an end to killing. And I don't know what to do about it." He looked up and his dark eyes met mine. "I had hoped Brisbois was with you, or that you knew where he was. He's a cunning fox, Brisbois, and he could get us through this, even now. But Brisbois—"

"Is probably dead," Mailys said. "Or he'd have surfaced by now."

"Yes, that is what I believe too," he said. "Which means we need to find a way to organize the scattered remnants for defense."

"We should free the Good Man," I said. I saw doubt cross LaForce's face, and I said, "Look, you might think whatever you want to of him. I know you think he was a fool for not listening to Brisbois and not realizing that Madame had undermined his authority, but he's not stupid, and he knows this seacity and his people."

He made a face. "Yes, but…He's not as cunning as he thinks. He was captured."

"That's because he was trying to save me. I interfered with his ability to save himself," I said.

He pursed his lips. "All right. Perhaps. Women can do that to men. But all the same, I'm not sure…"

"She's right about one thing, at least," Mailys said. "The Good Man is the only person, other than Brisbois, who knows most of the people on that list, and who probably has caches of information unknown even to Madame. If nothing else, it would allow us to gather the others, to defend ourselves and those like us."

"The Good Man is imprisoned," Corin said. "I presume in the palace dungeons, if those still exist. You know what they call that prison. The Stronghold. Those people it swallows, it never disgorges again."

LaForce was quiet a long time. Then he put his finger to his lips, motioning us to be silent. He stood and walked down the hallway once again, and then looked through the back window at the dark backyard. He came back. “There are no sounds out there, but I think there are. I mean, I think there are people up front. At the back, I’d bet there aren’t.”

“I could go listen and look,” Mailys whispered. “I have better senses than—”

“My senses are enhanced enough,” LaForce said. “The question is, Madame Sienna here is suggesting that we get the Good Man out of prison to find the list with the rest of us. This might work or not. The Good Man…” He hesitated and gave me the sort of look people give you when they’re afraid you’re going to be offended. “The Good Man is, of course, very capable, but he’s not the most…responsible of beings. It seems to me he always cared more for himself than the people or even the land in Liberte.”

“I don’t know about that,” Mailys said. “Sometimes I felt it was all an act. Brisbois thought it was an act, at any rate. That’s why he was loyal to the man. Loyal to the death.”

I started to open my mouth to tell them of Brisbois meeting someone in the dark, then reconsidered. Really, what did I know? I had a feeling I couldn’t judge Brisbois at all, a feeling like something moved beneath my feet, like solid ground giving way. And then I was sure I heard a sound, from the front. I jumped up and reached for the burner.

“Yes,” LaForce said, acknowledging my reaction. He swept a burner into his pocket, and then took the kitten from Tieri’s grasping hands, and slipped him into his jacket pocket, closing the clasp on top of the little creature. “He’ll be quite safe, Tieri. And I’m going to take to you to my wife.” Then he spoke very quickly. “Look, I have just enough contacts and just enough reach that I will whip up a crowd in front of the palace, and we’ll get them to attack the prison.”

“But—” Corin said. “The prison is impregnable.”

“The prison *was* impregnable,” LaForce said. “When we guarded it. It’s also booby-trapped, but I know where those are and can disable them. I might be the last person alive and free who knows those codes, in fact. I will make it easier for us to get in. Yes, there will be guards. Some of them will be like Madame and Brisbois. But, my dears”—he spoke very quickly

—“if we overwhelm them with force, they can’t stop us. Even supermen can’t stop a mob. There aren’t enough of them. And in this confusion, there will be enough people I can reach who have relatives in the prison and who want them out.”

“But most of those—”

“Conspired against the Good Man? At this point what difference does that make?” LaForce asked. “Most of them are chronic cases, who oppose all authority figures, and who will be as much against Madame as they were against St. Cyr. Any who were loyal followers of Madame will already be out.”

“So, you’re going to gather a crowd?” Mailys said. “And us?”

“If you can, without giving yourself away, go to as many of the houses of our people as you know, and try to get them out safely. Let us hope it’s not too late. I will take Tieri to a safe place. Bring as many of our people as you can to the plaza at…” He looked at the clock. “Midnight?”

“Three hours?” Mailys said. “Will that be enough?”

“No amount of time will be enough,” he said. “We must make of it what we can.”

The sounds out front were now obviously footsteps and whispers. Perhaps not obvious to anyone with nonenhanced hearing, but I could discern them clearly enough. Jonathan LaForce grabbed a dark blanket from the com room sofa and wrapped Tieri in it so she was an indistinct package, which he threw over one shoulder. He opened the back door. He’d somehow managed to get his burner in his free hand and he stood very still, listening. Mailys killed the lights in the kitchen, but even dark against the dark, I saw LaForce move, quickly, with that catlike movement of his.

An explosion sounded up front. Someone said, “*Merde.*”

And we were running out the door, around the graves dug in the backyard. Rather than use the gate, which was locked, we scrambled over the wall at one corner, emerging in a packed dirt alleyway that smelled of lilac.

We’d slept the day away and evening had fallen, with deeper blue shadows in the edge of the wall. We moved along the wall, away from the gate. It seemed to me there were human silhouettes by the gate, men who had been waiting for us.

Then, behind us, the house we'd just left exploded, in blues and yellows, in deafening sound, in a shower of debris.

Someone grabbed my hand and pulled and we ran along the wall, in the deeper portion of the shadows, our footsteps lost in the greater noise.

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The Gleaners

THE NEXT THREE HOURS WERE THE MOST BEWILDERING I EVER LIVED THROUGH. I was trying to process who I was and what I meant, in this particular context.

Look, for years, ever since I'd known myself, I'd been the fastest, the smartest, the strongest in any gathering you'd care to mention. As such, I'd been responsible for all the others, the weaker and more vulnerable people. It had been my job to keep them from getting hurt and, sometimes, from hurting themselves.

But now I was with two people, one of whom was at least my equal, and the other who didn't seem much different. And we were going to houses in the dark, houses that I couldn't find my way to on my own, trying to get the inhabitants to come with us.

We didn't separate. I didn't know what to think about that. Surely we could have gone to more houses, faster, if we'd gone individually. On the other hand, we'd have been more unprotected. Did we do right? To this day I don't know. One thing was sure. I couldn't go alone. We took backyard paths and side streets. We climbed over walls and zigzagged along garden walks. We cut across woods and parks.

I'd lost all sense of where I might be, even though one of the things engineered into me was a sense of direction. Oh, I could have told you where the Palace was, or what remained of it, at any given time. But I didn't know where we were going, or where the individual houses were in the grand scheme of the seacity, so my sense of direction was useless and my sense of vision was not much better than normal people's in the dark. Fine, it was better, but not as good as Len's had been. So the night, dark and filled with acrid smoke of many fires, became sort of a dream landscape.

I stumbled along, and sometimes Mailys or Corin would reach back and pull me, or one of them would put a finger to lips indicating silence.

The first three houses we went to were gutted and empty. Whether the inhabitants had escaped or been burned inside was something none of us could answer. We moved on.

In the fourth house, we found a couple. They recognized Mailys, who spoke hurriedly to them.

After much discussion, on the beach, while walking to the next house, slogging through fine dry sand, Corin said, “We should send the children and old people to sanctuary.”

“Sanctuary?” I said.

“It’s a place,” Corin said, “Brisbois it had prepared for…the for the Good Man if he should need to escape. Most people don’t know of it, but I can take the first one there and charge him with opening doors.”

“What if we let a traitor in?” Mailys asked.

Once more I had the impression that while they were both children compared to me, and while she was probably around Corin’s age, she’d lived a more difficult life, or perhaps one that involved greater vigilance. After all, enhanced or not, he’d had parents and had lived with them. She was one of the…what had LaForce called them? Motherless ones. I too was motherless, I realized, even if a part of me protested at this and said that my foster parents had done the best they could, that they’d tried to protect me, keep me safe, teach me to be human. But it wasn’t quite true. They’d taught me to protect humans, which meant I wasn’t one.

“Then we’ll have armed people we trust, ones who won’t let them out.”

Mailys sighed. “I suppose we’ll have to risk it.”

I felt very alone, as we stumbled to the next house and the next. The first had all able-bodied adults who chose to come with us. The second had two elders, who were not, no matter how enhanced, willing to risk their lives in a melee. Corin left with them, after arranging with Mailys to meet at some other house, and Mailys and I trudged on.

As our group grew, we sent some ahead to wait at the plaza in front of the Palace with instructions not to be noticed and not to cause any trouble until we were there and they knew it was time to strike. Again and again we told them the time to strike would be obvious.

We gave them no details in case we might be betrayed.

And we walked to the next house. After a while it became obvious we were not only not taking the longest, most winding route but the least likely one, going to houses further on and backtracking to houses closer to us, winding and unwinding across the seacity, in a dark broken only by the light from occasional fires.

“Of course,” Mailys said, when I told her. “We’re also avoiding all the places where we’ll come across possible hostiles.”

My sense of direction reestablished, I realized we were going to homes of all social classes, in all sorts of places, from highest—both in money and placement—to lowest, in the area from which Brisbois and I had taken off. I wondered why enhanced people would be living in the almost-slum conditions in some of the places.

Once, in the glow of a fire, it seemed to me I saw Brisbois walking with someone who, from his body type, looked a lot like Simon. If Simon were dead, I’d think they were both ghosts. As it was, I just looked away and we went deeper into the trees of a little wooded area, then up a lawn-smooth slope, and then, finally, to the door of a cottage next to a big house. The people there—husband, wife, and children—were all well and terrified. Corin joined us then and gave the wife instructions on where to take her children, while the father chose to come with us to the plaza. Along the way, Corin had taken word of where to go to some people with children whom we’d left behind.

It seemed to me we’d been walking for hours when Mailys said it was time to start winding towards the plaza. I don’t know how many houses we’d alerted. It wasn’t enough and it certainly wasn’t everyone. So we had sent others on to continue looking.

My feet hurt and my legs felt like they’d fall off as we climbed through a circuitous route, the path to the plaza in front of Simon’s palace.

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Party Line

THE PLAZA WAS FULL. AT FIRST I THOUGHT OUR RECRUITING EFFORTS HAD successful beyond all expectations. Then I feared none of them had anything to do with us.

I was wrong on both counts, I realized as I caught a glimpse of LaForce in the crowd. He had changed his clothes, and wore something that looked like a vending-machine worker suit in bright blue. There were other familiar faces in that crowd, faces I vaguely remembered seeing around the palace and which I had assumed were Simon's surviving guards and other servants. There were a lot of them, too many considering how many people we had contacted. But then we'd recruited those people and told them to warn and recruit others. I knew the mechanics of exponential buildup, so I knew this was possible.

But it also didn't take very long to realize that not everyone on this plaza could be a friendly. For one, there were people wearing white uniforms with splashes of red and and blue, their heads crowned with the red Frisian cap. Though I had not seen this exact uniform, it felt familiar. The colors echoed what Rose Parr had worn, and both were bright and bold like a shout in a small room.

More dangerous than those were other people moving through the crowd.

Look, I can't even tell how I knew they weren't on our side, but my mind picked up on an accumulation of signs and behaviors. Perhaps it was the fact that none of those on our side seemed to pay any attention to Jonathan LaForce or any of the other people I recognized. All those, without talking, traded looks that meant "I know you and I'm on your side." These others didn't. On the contrary. Their eyes would go slanty-hard as they looked around. There was something about them that made me think they should have been in uniform, but not only were they not, but none of them was anyone I remembered as Simon's guard.

They moved warily, like people who on a mission. No. More than that. Like trained, disciplined soldiers on patrol and afraid the crowd would get out of control.

Back on Eden there are no laws as such, though there are customs, societal best practices, enforced by tradition and common vigilance.

As such, there are no trained policemen, no trained army. However, when I had met people who were part of either on Earth, I recognized their way of standing and, often, their way of looking around.

You see, on Eden there were two groups of people trained to do what society as a whole needed. I had been a member of one and close to members of the other.

One was the darkship pilots and navigators. Darkship thieves, as Earth called us, and I supposed they were right since technically we stole powerpods grown on the biological solar collector ring that orbited the Earth. In a practical sense, the pods were more than surplus, and trimming them was probably a service to the Earth. You see, the powertrees grew exponentially. No one knew how to trim the planting, the secret of which had left Earth—and died—with Jarl Ingemar, who had designed it. Powerpods that were not caught in time exploded and seeded themselves. This had made the neat power tree ring of the late twenty-first century into a thicket, which in turn had made it harder to harvest and caused it to become more unstable and dangerous. So our stealing of the pods made the ring safer for Earth’s harvesters. Though, of course, I could understand their not seeing it that way.

At any rate, from Eden’s point of view, the darkship pilots and navigators were an unalloyed good, providing a service without which the entire society would starve for lack of energy. Because of that, and because the mission was dangerous, the people in the corps, usually designed before birth for the task by being given the special viral infections that changed our genes in the desired way, learned a discipline and a dedication quite absent from our peers. That resulted in protocols, designed to not give information to Earth, designed to bring us safely back to Eden when the mission was done. These protocols were rigid and unbreaking and had to be so ingrained that they could be obeyed even while ill or scared or even dying.

The training, the instillation of principles and routines made us different, harder. It made us stand differently and move differently. It made

us more than private individuals swayed by private individual ideas or cravings.

Pilots and navigators of Eden behaved and stood much like the police and military on Earth. So did the hushers of Eden, the informal, all voluntary group that was supposed to protect Eden should the Earth trace us and break in, or send an envoy.

The hushers weren't a proper paramilitary corps. It didn't have uniforms. The training it had was minimal. Its members were teenagers.

But its members were teenagers who, while they might be playing at defense, knew that the stakes were deadly. They'd been shown holos or some hastily taken videos of the Turmoils. They knew Earth had laws against modified people and that if it got into Eden, it would almost surely kill us all, and do so in the most horrible of ways.

As such, the game they were playing could turn lethal at any minute and they knew that as well as anyone else. They knew that if faced with a real threat, they would all likely die first, simply to provide the citizenry-at-large with a warning of an impending invasion that might, under very optimistic odds, give Eden the ability to survive.

They too stood and looked as though what they did was more important than they themselves were. Particularly when one came limping home, with one's ship half-dead and one's spouse wholly so. I remembered those young men—though there wasn't a rule about it, the hushers were almost always men—standing with grim faces, while some pointed weapons at me and two of them inspected my ship.

They had to do it, because a ship that damaged couldn't be scanned. The radiation permeating its very walls prevented that. Which meant that men wearing radiation-proof suits could be sequestered aboard; the beginning of an invasion force that would open the floodgates to the Earth.

The people in the crowd that I was sure weren't friendlies looked like those young men. Not very well trained, so not every movement was disciplined, unlike a policeman's or soldier's. But they were people on a mission, people doing something.

As I looked around the plaza, I wondered if they knew what they were doing, precisely, or if what they were doing was looking for potential trouble: if some instinct, some thought, had made them aware of the

possibility of an attack. Or if they simply knew with the Patrician clapped in his own dungeons someone was bound to attempt to free him.

Two things became obvious as I milled around. The first was that every one of the men and women in what we'll call the spook corps were carrying weapons. You could see the bulges in their clothes, or simply follow the way their hands kept slipping to the butt of a concealed gun. In seeing it, I had to consciously avoid going for my own weapon, but I did so, with an effort of will.

The second was that the spooks did not like this crowd assembling in the plaza. They looked hyperalert and hypersuspicious, as though the influx of people were a personal affront or a personal danger.

Mailys caught up with me, stood right behind me, and said in a whisper that was just audible, "The fun is about to begin."

She hadn't bent to talk to me, nor got in any way nearer than merely standing behind me, so I didn't know how to respond, but I half turned. Otherwise she wouldn't hear my voice, even as those standing in front of me would be able to read my lips. "There are people here on the alert," I said. "People who aren't of us, and who aren't in uniform."

She said something in response. I couldn't hear it clearly and it sounded like "What? Madame's trained monkeys?" but just as she said it, I realized a signal must have passed among our side, something I wasn't privy to, not being born and raised in the seacity.

The milling of the crowd changed. A group organized, with people in the front making a rush towards a side entrance to the palace. I didn't know why the side entrance, though I had a vague idea it might be the more direct route to the dungeon. What I did know was that Jonathan LaForce led it, running effortlessly forward, followed by a crowd that ran just as fast and like they'd trained for it. It seemed to me they shouted, *"En avant"* as they ran.

Like that, yet a third group of hostiles appeared, running out of the palace. These men were trained and knew what they were doing. I didn't know if what they wore were uniforms. They wore some sort of drab jumpsuit. I didn't spend much time studying them. They were armed with weapons, which they fired above the crowd. The crowd backed up, Jonathan LaForce in the middle, clearly not willing to be the first to return fire.

Somehow, with no thought or coordination, I'd moved forward, and I was now standing near the front of the crowd who'd made a run for the palace.

I noted by the corner of my eye that the first group of spooks I'd spotted in the crowd were moving into position, circling the group that had made the offensive, including those like Mailys and myself who had moved in afterwards, actuated by who knew what annoying protective instinct.

There were more of us, I knew, in the plaza-at-large. More people called upon by Mailys and me; more people who had been cajoled or guilted into this quixotic attempt to free Simon. But once those trained men had gotten into position, they would be no more able to join and help us or protect us than if we were on another planet. The spooks were professionals and would ruthlessly cut them all down in the attempt.

The men in white uniforms had moved in front of the palace entrance, but behind the men who'd fired above the crowd's heads.

I ignored the uniformed people. There is a good rule of thumb in how to deal with someone who is armed and who might be hostile to you, and that is to look into their eyes.

In this case, the eyes of the uniformed men looked a little scared, a lot puzzled, caught somewhere between a wish that they weren't there at all and a sense of panic.

But the eyes of the men who'd already fired looked sharp, attentive. They were following the spooks dispersing themselves around our group. The movement was not obvious, unless you knew what to look for. If it were obvious, the people about to become entrapped might panic and bolt. And if it didn't become obvious? Well then the people would be trapped. And then? Who knew? They might kill us in batch lots, working from all sides, though that required rather precise settings on the burners if it weren't to become a circular firing squad. Or they could march us off towards the newer version of Madame la Guillotine.

Where do our actions come from? From what deep well of thought and fear, of rationality and emotion do our sudden actions spring?

At the thought of having my head chopped off, just like the people I'd seen on the holo, at the memory of that lamentable spectacle, something sprang into place and combined with my certainty that we must get in and free Simon. With the thought of the invasion massing in the waters around

Liberte—the invasion only he would know how to counter—and with the certainty that something horrible was about to be unleashed upon us, I saw no other option.

I reached for my burner.

I could have talked, I suppose, and made some great speech. But I had a bad feeling the great historical speeches that had roused people to action throughout history only happened in historical or fictional holos.

The reality of here and now only allowed for one type of action. I had my burner out, had set it on cut and was sweeping through the line of nonuniformed men ready to shoot us.

My faster than human speed allowed me to get most of them before they could shoot. But the ones on the other end started shooting, and now the ones on the sides, the spooks who had been silently encircling the crowd, started firing also, revealing themselves.

I presume that their job of encircling wasn't complete. I presume the larger crowd that had been on our side, or even perhaps casual bystanders, then joined in.

I presume, because from where I was standing, what I saw and felt was a push in the back, a roar of a multitude behind me. The people who'd been blocking access to the palace were down, bleeding, injured or dead. There was hand-to-hand combat to the far left of me, but that didn't matter.

The way ahead was clear, and I could go and rescue Simon, and then I could let him solve the rest of the problems, and I was done.

I leapt over a decapitated man on the ground, my burner in hand, and headed to the door to the palace, an inarticulate scream coming out of my throat.

And the crowd followed me.

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I Am Crying All Inside

A GUARD SUDDENLY APPEARED IN FRONT OF ME, MATERIALIZING OUT OF A SIDE hallway. I killed him and jumped over his body. Jonathan LaForce leapt next to me. He shot someone out of my line of sight. I gathered the person would have killed me, otherwise.

"More guts than thought," he said, as if he approved, while I was shooting the next man.

There were people pouring in after us, but I didn't know who they were. I knew who Jonathan was and he knew what my objective was. "Simon?" I said. "I don't know—"

He nodded and gestured. "That way," he said. "The deeper levels."

We ran forward and got caught in a gravity well that lifted us. Other people weren't following us, but were fanning all over that floor. There were sounds of burners going off, and screams and swearing.

As we landed on the floor above, moving our feet to the safety zone to avoid being pulled up yet another floor, LaForce said, "There are other prisoners." And as he started at a cautious trot down the hallway in front of us, he added. "There are people on this level who were headed for execution. A lot of the people who chose to help—" He didn't finish. He didn't need to. Throughout history friends, relatives and sympathizers of prisoners had broken them out of prison. We ran down a hallway. LaForce burned a lock, kicked a door down, ran in. I followed He fell almost immediately into a grav well, and I burned the man who would have burned him. Then I jumped into the well.

Other people came up behind us. I swept upward with my burner, but they seemed as fast as I was and jumped out of the way.

At the end well, Jonathan moved from dropping to running with unreal speed and I followed suit as best I could, running alongside him down ever-narrowing corridors. This area was, surprisingly, unguarded; all pursuit lay

behind us, manifested mostly as the sound of pounding feet in heavy military boots.

I turned and did another sweep with the burner, but our pursuers got out of the way. A couple returned fire. Jonathan LaForce said, *"Merde!"* and I turned in time to burn two men who stood in front of a ridiculously armored door.

Jonathan was kicking at it, but I turned my burner to hot beam and melted the lock, to lend assistance.

The door opened suddenly with a sickening sound of rusty metal.

The room inside was bigger than a cell. It didn't look like a cell, either. It looked like an amphitheater set up for media presentations. There were several holo pickups all around.

In the center of the room—

It took me a minute to absorb, to understand that this was Simon.

They'd made him kneel at what looked like another laser guillotine. I don't know how. He wasn't bound. He might have been drugged or otherwise incapacitated. I screamed, "Simon," but he didn't turn.

Before I could lift my burner, before I could do anything, there was a buzz of the laser blade activating, very loud in the silence. I realized not only had no one in the room reacted to our arrival, but there were no sounds behind us. It was as though everything had stopped—but nothing could stop the laser blade.

It descended very fast and yet it seemed to take centuries.

Simon didn't react. When the blade touched his neck, he twitched and made a sound that was more than breath, but less than a scream.

His head rolled. His body fell. One of the men who'd been standing by moved very quickly, grabbed the head and lifted it, so the holo pickups would get it. The expression looked blank, save for the eyes, which still appeared to be trying to focus. The neck dripped blood. More blood ran down the white uniform sleeve of the guard, as he proclaimed, *"Le roi est mort."*

Suddenly, the entire room came to life. Guards headed for us at a gallop. Madame, who in her medals had been watching the execution with a dignified expression of sorrowful wrath, broke pose and said, "Seize them."

Men behind us grabbed our shoulders and held us tight.

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To Your Scattered Bodies Go

JONATHAN SAID, "*MERDE*," AND MOVED, A BLUR OF MOTION SO FAST THAT I couldn't track what he was doing. He elbowed someone in the solar plexus, and I had a vague idea that he put out the eyes another with the fingers of his other hand. Then he shot the man holding me. "Run," he said.

I shot the two men he had incapacitated before they could recover enough to make trouble, and then shot the man still holding me at close quarters. I don't know why they hadn't killed us But they hadn't. Perhaps they wanted us for the guillotine.

They were fast, but I was faster. And stronger. And possibly smarter. Or maybe they simply suffered from the instinctive recoil that prevents males from seriously injuring a female.

I became a whirlwind of death. In Eden there are varying levels of dueling, and the most basic one is "bare hands." Bare hands can be to first injury or to death. Responsible parents have their children trained. My parents had had me trained for an unusual reason. While I was faster, stronger and smarter than most other children and they couldn't be afraid I wouldn't be able to defend myself, they were afraid I'd get in a fight and accidentally kill someone, unless I knew what killed and how to prevent myself from doing it.

The training had gone on for years, and most of it was acquired at an instinctive level, particularly the self-defense when threatened. Now that instinct kicked in. I kicked, gouged, bit. Once the men holding me had been disabled, they were shot. Then I killed enough of the ones in the hallway to clear a path for us. When Jonathan didn't react, I realized he was stunned, whether by my speed or my lack of restraint, I didn't know. I didn't really care. All I knew was that Earth has odd social rules.

I reached over, grabbed his arm and pulled. "Run!"

For a moment I worried he was wounded or wouldn’t react. But he did and, as I started running, pulling him behind me, he caught not only my speed but the import of my dodging and ducking so the men in the sidelines could not grab us.

We ran and dodged. I heard him fire his burner twice. I also heard people fire their burners at us. It didn’t matter. We were moving too fast and weaving too much for them to get an easy fix on us.

We left the prison by a side door, and I scrambled up a wooded slope, all the while pulling Jonathan, all the while keeping an ear out for pursuit.

At the top of the slope, I pulled him behind a rock and fell on my belly. He flopped down beside me, breathing hard.

“Are you hurt?” was his first question.

I shook my head, and he gave me a careful, squinting glare. “Are you sure?”

I nodded, trying to comprehend what we’d seen. Simon was dead. My entire mission, everything I’d come back to Liberte to do, had failed. Thoughts pushed in, all related to that that one theme. If Simon was dead, Liberte was powerless before the invasion that was about to happen. If Simon was dead, there was nothing I could do to stop the killing. As helplessness and grief and a sort of despairing rage washed over me, LaForce said, “Good. You run now.”

I turned in shock. “You’re hurt?”

He shook his head. “Nothing that matters. But if we run in different directions—”

“No,” I said. “I will not let you sacrifice yourself for me.”

“But you’d sacrifice yourself?” he said. “For me, for the Patrician, for Liberte?”

I blinked. I started to say I wasn’t sacrificing myself for anyone, but he repeated forcefully one word. “Run.”

I stared for a second, and then he said, “The longer you stay, the more likely we’ll both be caught. They’re organizing pursuit. They’ll be here. If your similarity to the Patrician’s guest has been noted, you’ll be hunted house to house. Being with you will make me less safe. Now run.”

I could hear voices and footsteps behind us, coming up the slope.

I ran.

While I ran, my mind analyzed the situation. Run in zigzags so they won't catch me. Get as far away from the palace as possible, far enough away that no one would think I was the same person. Find a crowd. Meld.

All this was done more or less by instinct and without thought. I ran through the grounds of the palace, avoiding the sounds of humans without pausing to think or analyze them. I ran to the furthest point of the garden as fast as I could. I scrambled up a dimatough wall, vaulted it, and ran straight out, as far from the palace as I could go, towards the low-lying area where the working people were.

Did I consciously run towards the motel I'd used with Brisbois before? Not on purpose. Perhaps my subconscious guided me there, because I'd been safe there before. But if I'd considered it at all, I'd have thought of the danger. The more you repeat an action, the more likely you are to be caught at it.

When I found myself in front of the motel, no one was there who looked like they might be searching for me. I was, at any rate, far enough from the palace, it would take a while for them to get here. Almost as important, we still had the lease for the room, and, well, there was a good chance I could…What? Pretend to be someone else? Certainly pretend to be asleep. At any rate, the chances of any pursuers choosing to break into this particularly room…I verified the camera was still broken by the entrance, and then I punched the code into the door and stepped in. Three steps, and I looked up and froze.

Brisbois and someone else were in the room. I didn't see the someone else clearly because he was half in shadows and because I was staring at Brisbois in disbelief.

"About time you got here," he said. "Come in and shut the door."

I went in. I shut the door. Which was when I realized he was pointing a burner at my heart.

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FRATERNITE

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Day of Truce

"STOP THAT, ALEXIS," SIMON SAID. "SHE'S NOT A DANGER."

"She's not a danger," Brisbois said, his burner unwavering at my chest, "if she is Madame Sienna. If she's not?"

Simon made a sound, but he was looking at me, his eyes narrowed. For a moment I wondered if he knew about what the people of Olympus could do and had done to change my appearance. Then I wondered if he was a ghost or if they had some way to bring men back from the dead. And then I thought nothing as he turned to Brisbois and said, "It looks like a standard job of disguise, well enough, I daresay, for her to pass in a crowd and not to be identified on sight anywhere in Liberte, but, Alexis, I can smell her. It's Zen."

I could smell him too. One doesn't think about it, even with enhanced senses, but I remembered when I was very young identifying people by smell. Now I realized that though I hadn't thought about it, he too smelled familiar. This was undoubtedly Simon St. Cyr. But I'd seen him beheaded.

For the first time, and I surely hope the last time in my life, in response to something as paltry as an emotional shock, my legs got shaky, and I had to sit.

"I don't feel all that well."

Brisbois continued pointing the burner at me, but as I bent to put my head down at my knee level, he let out air in a sustained hiss, as though releasing annoyance, and said, "Merde. I knew she looked different. Yes, she was…modified to pass. The Good Man Keeva's idea, I think."

Simon made a sound that wasn't quite a cackle, and said, in a tone of profound loathing, "He would."

Once more I wondered what things I'd missed of those that passed between normal humans. I'd thought they were friends. I'd thought—

“He couldn’t send troops,” Brisbois said, in the tone of a man who gives the devil his due. “He was hamstrung. He wanted to help you.”

Simon snorted.

That was enough. It was his snort, and I knew it. I sat up. I glared at him. “I saw you dead,” I said. I realized I was shaking. “I saw you beheaded. They held up the head to the cameras. They said *le roi est mort*. They—”

At the time the shock had been so great, and processed with all the fear and the chase immediately following, that I had not taken that scene as real. It’s hard to explain, but it was more like a set scene, something out of a theater production: Madame with her medals, and her entourage, and the crowd going silent, while proclamation was made to the holo pickups.

Now I saw it with perfect recall. The head, with its still-living eyes. Blood at the lips. Blood pouring out of the neck.

I ran straight into the fresher and threw up into the toilet.

When I recovered, Simon offered me his hand to stand. I ignored his hand and pulled myself up by holding onto the sink. The mirror above it reflected my own image, pale and staring, like the face of a drowned woman.

“I’m sorry,” Simon said. “I don’t know what you saw. I didn’t mean for you to—”

I rinsed my mouth, spat out the water, turned to him, wiping my mouth to the back of my hand. “I saw you dead,” I said again, and then, “I saw you beheaded.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I never meant for you to—”

“Go to hell.” It wasn’t even an imprecation. It was a civil exhortation. I wasn’t sure how he had managed this, but I was sure he had somehow faked his own death for reasons I couldn’t fully understand. Which meant he’d never needed to be rescued. Which meant I was an idiot.

He looked aggrieved, as though my reactions were all out of proportion. “No, you don’t understand. I never meant for you to be here at all. You were supposed to stay safe. I told Brisbois.”

That’s when I punched him. It wasn’t a hard punch. I couldn’t have put force into a punch just then. I was exhausted, my head was spinning, and the image of his beheading remained in my mind, so it was like punching a ghost.

He held onto his jaw, blinked at me. Part of him looked bewildered, incredulous, as though no one had ever punched him in his life, and I wondered if that was Simon's tragedy. No one had ever spanked him. I said again, "Go to hell. This is not a game. I was trying to save your life. I didn't want you to die. I thought I owed you something."

His eyes widened in even greater shock than at being punched. "You were? You didn't? You did?"

How do you even answer that? I didn't have to.

Brisbois loomed behind him. He moved Simon out of the way, gently but carelessly, as though he'd been an object blocking Brisbois's passage. "You were at the palace?" he said. "Why were you at the palace? You were never supposed to break into the dungeon."

"Of course I was," I said, bewildered. And to Simon, in an accusatory tone, "I was trying to save you. You can't have recovered from being beheaded. So that must have been faked. I don't know how you did it, but I wonder about the poor sod who was beheaded in your place. I suppose he was altered to look like you?" He shook his head slightly, but I ignored it. "Just as I was modified. Oh. Hell."

He sighed, and put out a hand. "*Ma petite—*" he said. His hand was cupped as though he'd hold my forearm, but he never made contact. He pulled back, instead, and said, "No one was beheaded."

"I saw—"

"I think perhaps," Brisbois said, "we should retreat to the room proper and find out what Madame Sienna has been up to, and who might have tailed her here. We might not be safe here."

"We are safe," I said. "No one followed me. I was too fast."

"Pah," Brisbois said, and I expected him to deliver himself of one of his charming lectures on the stupidity of women in general and myself in particular. "Pah. Come sit down, Madame, and tell me exactly what you've been doing."

I wouldn't have obeyed if the back of my brain hadn't been so fully occupied in figuring out how Simon could have survived, how he could say no one had been beheaded. I instinctively recoiled at Brisbois's demand, but then I realized I had to find out what had happened. One thing I was sure of: Earth or not, people did not grow spare heads.

I walked out of the fresher, in between them, and sat on the edge of the bed, my hands on my knees. “You told me to run and to take care of the children. By which I presume you meant Corin and Mailys.”

“Did you?” Brisbois asked.

“Yes,” I said, and then it occurred to me I had no idea if Corin or Mailys were still alive. He couldn’t have expected me to keep them safe while running for my life, after the attack on the palace. And yet, I was absolutely sure that’s what he expected. The sense of failure that had pursued me since watching the beheading now crushed me. And then I realized Simon was still alive. And if Simon was still alive, I’d been the victim of a massive deception. Perhaps more than one.

I told them everything I’d done, how we’d ended up in the Bonnaires’ home, about the child, about Jonathan LaForce.

“Jonny is alive, then,” Brisbois said, sounding relieved.

“Yes,” I said. “Or at least he was alive when we parted.”

Brisbois nodded. “He’s alive then. He’s one of those you can only kill by catching him unwary. If he knew they were after him, he’s alive. If you’re alive, he’s alive.”

I frowned a little, feeling as though my ability to survive had been disparaged. “He might have been pursued more closely.”

Brisbois pursed his lips. “Maybe,” he said. “But why was he looking for me? Why was he in my office? Besides wanting to save the others? And he should have given me some credit. I was trying to get the others to safety already.”

“There is other stuff. There is…your wife.”

For just a second there was an expression of extreme shock in Brisbois’s face. “My wife?”

“Rose Parr. Madame. They said she was your wife.”

“Ah,” he said. His voice sounded really hoarse. I thought I saw Simon smirk out of the corner of my eye. “Not these last ten years at least. She—”

“Set him up to get caught and killed,” Simon said, and as Brisbois opened his lips, he lifted a hand. “Peace. I’m aware I did as well. I claim extreme necessity and also the extreme fear of a trapped animal. But I didn’t even know who you were, much less being intimately acquainted with you. And I think I’ve made up for that lapse, have I not?”

Brisbois didn’t say anything, but I got the impression his eyes flashed. “We have no time for foolishness,” he said. I thought he was talking to me, because it had the same tone of his prior diatribes on women, but then he glared at Simon. “Not even a rousing game of let’s see if we can make Alexis squirm. What has my ex-wife to do with this, Madame Sienna?”

“I am to understand she’s trying to eliminate all enhanced people as well consolidating her power over the nonenhanced. I heard there were hundreds of executions.”

“Thousands,” Simon said, sounding distressed. “She had people flown from the territories. I’ve been on the edges of the plaza. I’ve seen it…” He shook his head. “That’s why my execution had to be staged as soon as possible. So I could help people.”

I wanted to ask him how he could have hurried the execution. I realized he must be the man I’d seen with Brisbois in the dark, talking of hurrying the Patrician’s execution, which solved at least one of my problems for me. Whatever else was true or not, Brisbois was loyal.

But there was a more pressing matter than my curiosity to know exactly how I’d been deceived. For one, I was almost sure the deception hadn’t been aimed at me, or not only at me. “I don’t know how you intend to help people,” I said, “but LaForce says our case is dire. Besides the executions, the fleet is about to attack and—”

For the first time I had Simon’s attention. He stood straighter, and asked, “What fleet?”

“The Good Men,” I said. And as I saw him shape his mouth to say *“Merde”* I said, “Not that one. Apparently with our internal dissension, there is more of a chance of taking us with a smaller force, and so they… they are. Or they’re trying to.”

Simon had been standing next to the door to the fresher. Now he leaned against the door frame and slid down it, to sit on the dubiously clean floor. He made a face. “How many ships?” he asked. “How many men?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“But Jonny LaForce thought they were a problem?” Brisbois asked.

“Yes, he said it was a reason we needed to free the Patr—you, Simon. Because only you could organize forces for defense fast enough. He said something about their bringing as many of their troops to bear as they

could, so that they could crush Liberte, before returning to their war with the Usaians."

He pursed his lips in a silent whistle, then turned to Brisbois. "Alexis?"

"If you're asking me my opinion of LaForce's estimate, let me assure you that this is not something to dismiss out of hand. I've known Jonny since he was a toddler. He can be impetuous; he's something of a hothead; he pens romances in his spare time, but he's simply the best second-in-command I've ever had. If he says we're about to get attacked with overwhelming force, we're about to get attacked with overwhelming force. I don't know the details, but I'm sure his intelligence is good."

Simon looked…odd. Not quite confused, though confusion was part of it. It was a look somewhere between annoyance and disappointment.

He took a deep breath. "Not attack us as such, Alexis. This has nothing to do with us."

"It doesn't?" Alexis asked.

"No. All we have to do is gather our people and get them out of here before the attack. And then we're fine. They can take all of the isle and Madame in the bargain for all I care."

Alexis Brisbois's face hardened, something like disbelief casting his features into stone. "*Monsieur le Patrician*, it is not that simple."

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Brother

"THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE WRONG," SIMON SAID. "IT IS PRECISELY THAT SIMPLE."

Brisbois was quiet a long time. Then he sighed. "Simon," he said, and it was the first time I'd heard him call my friend by his first name, but it must not be the first time he'd done it, because there was no surprised reaction. However, the tone in which Alexis said "Simon" was more earnest and pleading than when he said "Patrician" or "Good Man" or "Protector" or "St. Cyr."

"Simon," he said again. "I know what your plans were. I know what you wanted to do, but I don't think it's possible. I think you're going to give up something of your dream, to change it, and I think even you will see it. There are people whose lives depend on your actions, on your assuming responsibility. Innocent lives that have done nothing to deserve the hell about to be unleashed on them."

Simon stood up, his movements jerky. I realized for the first time that he was very tired. I thought if he'd slept since the attack on the palace it had been catnaps, possibly in not very safe refuges. And once more I wondered where he'd been and why.

He shook his head. His mouth hardened. "I am tired of being responsible for people," he said. "I am tired of being told that the lives of innocents depend on me."

The statement shocked me, said like that, in the full light, well, not of day but of a relatively well-lit cheap motel room. All my life I'd been told I was responsible for others. Because I was faster, smarter, stronger, I was supposed not only to look after those I liked, but to make sure that even those I didn't like didn't somehow run afoul of me. So, for instance, no matter how bad their offenses against me, I wasn't allowed to challenge anyone to a duel, because if I killed them and in the process showed how much better I was, though I might be technically correct, everyone in Eden would turn against me.

My brother—to call him that—Kit, had it easier than I because he had been bioengineered, visibly, as a “cat,” as the pilots of darkships were called. He had the eyes that looked—though weren’t, exactly—feline, and so everyone knew he also had reflexes faster than any normal human being. As such, he could excuse himself from a duel by pleading the advantage this would give him. He could admit to being better than normal humans at a myriad things and they’d leave him alone.

I couldn’t. Not unless the ability in dispute were navigation or an instinctive feel for machinery. For some reason those weren’t often brought up in normal everyday life.

So I was in the unenviable position of having to be responsible for both myself and others, of avoiding injury even to those who openly courted it by antagonizing me. It didn’t make for a sweet disposition. I narrowed my eyes at Simon, who was crossing his arms on his chest, narrowing his eyes and glaring daggers at Brisbois.

I had never agreed so much with anyone, and yet something nagging at the back of my head told me Simon had no right to shrug off the load his birth had imposed on him just because he was tired of it.

“You can’t give up your responsibility just because you’re tired,” Brisbois said, softly, in the sort of voice a man uses to speak to an injured child. “I understand your exasperation, and I understand why you’re tired of it all. I approved of and agreed with your plan, remember? You were going to give up rule, and you were going to go off and be a colonist in the territories, with no more responsibility to Liberte than any other citizen.” He glanced sideways at me, for just a second, but suddenly I knew, with absolute certainty, as though it had been said, that part of Simon’s plan included marrying me. I wasn’t sure if I was offended at the idea that he thought he could just marry me if he wished, or if I was touched at his plan. Of course, someone like Simon wouldn’t know rejection. How could he? He’d been born the heir to the Good Man of Liberte. Anything within the confines of the isle would have been his for the asking. Everything except freedom to be himself.

And on that I was flattered that he understood he couldn’t have me as his lady, as a Good Man. He wanted me as a friend and a partner, not a decoration. I looked at him with softer feelings than I’d ever entertained, as Brisbois went on, “Then when this horrible attack happened, I went along with the rougher plan that we were going to get you executed—and to hurry

it up with false rescue attempts—so that you could disappear, knowing that at the same time that you and I were going to rescue every one of our kind we could. But that plan has escaped our hands as much as your former plan, Simon. We can't do that."

"Why not?" Simon's protest had all the petulant defiance of the very young.

"Because, Patrician, it's gotten out of control. We meant to re-create the revolution, did we not, without the dark side of it? Well, you meant to do so. I wasn't sure the feat was possible, but I liked the idea and encouraged you to try it. Except that, just like the first revolution, back in ancient France, it has all fallen in the wrong hands. For reasons beyond our control, you couldn't stay in power and slowly guide people to greater freedom and a more equitable society. You were deposed, the palace was attacked, people got killed, and then Rose seized control and more people were killed."

"Rose…" Simon rubbed his hand across his face, as though trying to get rid of cobwebs. I wondered how tired he really was. "She is a problem."

"No, what Rose is," Alexis said, "is insane. She's not in control of the populace because she's not in control of herself. There are ways people like us can go. We, I mean, not the improved ones, not people like Jonathan LaForce or Corin who are enhanced, but were still raised by real mothers and fathers, but people like Mailys and myself, and, I suppose you: the motherless ones, the surrogate born, the crèche raised. Once we find out who and what we are, we can come to terms with it and scream defiance in the face of the world, saying, *yeah, I'm unnatural and what of it? I'll show you what someone unnatural can do.* Or we can hate what we are and envy everyone who was born of a real mother and a real father. We can let that corrode us and destroy the basic decency within us and our sanity too. It is insane to want what you can't have. Most of us—you, I think—choose a mixed path. But Rose—Rose chose self-hate and envy at full throttle. She chose to hate herself and all like her, and to work to make sure that no one was ever created or ever lived who wasn't born in the natural way and of natural parents."

"Myself, you suppose?" Simon said. It felt like a scream, and wasn't any less scary for being said at normal voice. "Do you have any idea how much more I had to bear, finding out I'd been born, not even as someone designed for a purpose, but as a blank, one of those kept down in the…in

the lab. That I was no one and nothing, but a body my putative father could take over to continue his life? Do you have any idea how that felt, particularly when I'd been raised to think of myself as…as special…the son and heir of the Good Man? Particularly when I had all these plans for what I was going to do to improve the lot of the seacity?

"And then to find out it was all a lie. And that yet, somehow, unless I wanted to be responsible for a monstrous invasion and massacre, I had to stay on; I had to devote my entire life to perpetuating a horrible regime because the alternative was worse? No, Alexis, you have no idea what I, myself, faced. And you have no right to tell me I have to keep on facing it. You don't own me."

The last came out as a roar.

Alexis Brisbois was quiet a long time after that, staring at Simon, who glared up at him. I thought that pose of indignation must be hard to maintain, that pitch of anger difficult to keep. I could almost see the flagging of his indignation behind his eyes, replaced not by calm but by an immense tiredness.

Alexis spoke again in the slow, patient tone, as though Simon were an overwrought child. "No one owns you. And some of us will help you, always, for the sake of what you've already done; what you've tried to do. But some of those people who served you are like Jonathan, Simon. They have families. Both the parents who agreed to have them improved, and the children they've sired. There are children like Tieri, orphaned and lost, who will get killed by the turmoil, or killed in the invasion. Right now, our best hope for resisting the invasion and coming out on the other side alive are the enhanced and trained people who are scattered and running. They will come to your voice, but to none other. Simon, the good and the bad will die together if this isn't stopped."

Simon's face contracted in a snarl. "Damn you," he said. "Damn you." Then the snarl became something like a hiccup. "And I can die trying to protect the innocent, but no one, no one can stop this. Certainly not I. I am dead, Brisbois, as far as the seacity is concerned."

Alexis shrugged. "Not so far as those of us who know you are concerned. I suggest, Simon, that to begin with we organize our people and take down—" He took a deep breath. "My wife and Jean Dechausse and the whole merry circus of bloodthirsty, power-hungry moral cripples. And then

we can…perhaps, organize a defense. Hasty and of course it's not guaranteed we'll survive, but we can perhaps defend Liberte?"

Simon looked at him a long while, his eyes slightly unfocused. "I wish I could believe we had a chance."

"I'll stay," I said. "I'll help."

"Will you?" A quick look of Simon's and the old laughing mockery—maybe self-mockery—was back in his eyes. "You don't have to, you know? We're not your people and you owe us nothing, and there's a good chance it's going to end up with all of us dead."

"Will it?" I asked. "And how am I not your kind? I also was assembled protein by protein and have no real parents. If I'm not your kind, I don't know who is. And I also learned that it's my responsibility to care for others, because they are weaker than myself."

He put his hand to me and touched my fingers—just the tip. "I should send you away," he said.

"Are you under the impression she'd stay away?" Brisbois asked, amusement in his voice. "Have you met Madame Sienna?"

Simon gave me a look with a raised eyebrow, as though asking me to corroborate or deny. I shrugged and shot what I hoped was a quelling glance at Brisbois, but I said, "I'm not going to hide and quake while you two go face danger. It's not my style. And I owe you too much to repay it with indifference."

"In the name of gratitude, she helped organize an attack on the prison."

"You mean people died in it," I said. "And I do understand that, but—"

"No, Madame Sienna. People dying in a situation like ours is inevitable. The point is to make sure the right people die. From what you said, you both killed some of the infiltrators making war on our people, and you freed some who were headed for execution. Your effort might have been misapplied, and that is our fault for not informing you of our plans, but even so you did more than we could have done on our own." He gave Simon a look. "You see, Patrician, it is useless to keep her out of our plans."

I was so stunned at being praised without irony by Brisbois and on something in which I thought I was guilty of a mistake too, that all I could do was mumble, "It was LaForce's idea."

But Simon only nodded as though all of this made perfect sense. He set his mouth in a hard line, and said, "Fine, then. Let's set out and start

gathering people who can help us fight Madame Parr and stop the invasion of the seacity.”

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Search the Sky

BRISBOIS REACHED OUT AND GRABBED AT SIMON'S ARM. "NOT YET," HE SAID.

Simon looked up at him and scowled. "If it's true," he said, "that we're about to be invaded and if you add that to the bloodbath taking place more or less continuously, people like us hunted down and killed both here and in the territories, certainly you can't mean we should delay. Delay why? Delay how?"

"Delay," Alexis said, "because you're dropping on your feet, Simon. When is the last time you slept?"

"I?" Simon seemed surprised at the enquiry. He ran his hand across his face, again. "Couple of days ago, I think. I can't risk being caught. And I was looking—"

"You have both of us to watch over you," Brisbois said. "No one is going to surprise you. And with you being officially dead, you have some protection. Unless I'm very wrong, I know how to watch over the entire area." He went into the bathroom and we heard him banging on something. He returned and announced, "Yep. We can go up on the roof and watch the whole neighborhood. There's roof access in the bathroom. I thought there might be."

"Why?" I said.

He shrugged. "Because these motels aren't dimatough. They're ceramite. If one of them catches fire, the entire motel will be an inferno, and your only chance at survival is a broom from the roof."

"Is a broom provided?" Simon asked, sounding as curious as I felt.

Alexis nodded but made a face. "Four, which is the maximum occupancy for the room. But I don't know if—any of them will fly. Never mind. You and I are provisioned, and should it become needed to clear out, Madame Sienna can double up with one of us. However, in our situation,

taking off flying from the roof might be more of a problem than roasting. It will attract attention from the Revolutionary Guard watching the air."

"So," Simon said. "Why delay in this fleabag fire trap? Let's go and __"

Brisbois shook his head. "Unless you are at your best, you'll get killed, and if the complete list of people like us isn't in your head, I'd bet you know a lot more about where to find the right people, how to command their loyalty and where to find the vehicles and weapons needed for defense. I was your second in command, the master of your guard and your defense, and yet you often told me things I didn't remember or had never known about. What's more, you have their loyalty." His voice changed from explaining to begging. "Simon, we can't do this without you. That's the whole point. If we could, we would go ahead without you, and I'd gladly take you to a place of safety as I took Doctor Dufort and his wife."

"But I am fine. I don't need to sleep," Simon said. He tried to look alert but the tiredness was visible behind his eyes. "And besides, what if someone followed Zen here?"

"They would have shown up by now. I have been paying attention to every sound nearby," Brisbois said. "There is no one in pursuit, or they didn't make it this far. My guess is Jonny threw them a spectacular distraction, to keep them from finding her.

"Fine, so we're safe," Simon said. "And it's time to work. How do we start? Whom do we contact?"

"We contact Jonathan LaForce," Brisbois said. His eyes were narrow as though he were calculating something. "And we wait for his answer. And should he not answer, we try Mailys and then on down my list. When one of them answers, we arrange a meeting with everyone they can reach. Then we figure out the best way to start, by taking Madame out first, I think, but I would like their opinion. It's not going to be done quickly."

"But surely," Simon said, "nothing can be gained by waiting."

Brisbois suddenly made a sound somewhere between an exclamation of surprise and a shout, while looking behind me, at the door to the motel. He reached in his pocket.

I turned. There was nothing but motel door, locked and completely uninteresting.

I turned around again, and pulled my burner, pointing it between Brisbois's eyes, as he was holding Simon, who had lost consciousness. Or at least I hoped that was it, and not that Brisbois had killed him. I shouldn't have turned. Oldest trick in the book. Obviously, Simon had turned too.

"Soporific. Injector. Fast acting," Brisbois said, ignoring me and the burner, as he half-carried, half-threw Simon onto the bed. "Stop glaring. He was not going to sleep any other way and we can't risk having him blundering around sleep-deprived. Help me get the dresser in front of the door for double insurance, and then we'll go up to the roof and keep watch while he sleeps. I'll send coded messages out and see if either Mailys or Jonny answers. And in a few hours, we'll see what is sane to do."

I hesitated a moment before putting my burner away and lending him a hand moving the ceramite dresser—heavy, ungainly and poured by someone who didn't mind if he left sharp protrusions in the furniture—in front of the door, solidly blocking it.

He led me into the bathroom, where he stepped up onto the vanity, which groaned and creaked under his weight, and reached up to pound his fist on a barely visible trapdoor in the ceiling. It was only visible because there were stains from its having leaked, all around the edges. It took a moment to open at his pounding, possibly because of the rain and some decay on the finish, sealing it shut.

When it opened with a bang, bringing an influx of night air into the room, he lifted himself up by the force of his arms, and pulled himself onto the roof.

Then he lay flat and extended a hand down to me, to help me up. I ignored his hand and instead clambered up on the vanity and reached both arms up. At which point he put both hands just about at my underarms and pulled me up, while I tried vainly to make it up on my own.

"I didn't need help," I said as I landed on the roof, and then I wanted to bite my tongue in two for making such a childish remark.

His eyes danced with amusement but he didn't say anything, except, "Down." He had settled on his belly.

The top of the unit was completely flat, covered in dust and debris, of course, from years in the elements, but mostly crusted with a white salt coat, like almost everything in this artificial seacity in the middle of the ocean. Around the edges was a little lip, probably not more than had been

left by the extruder, but enough to hide us when we fell flat on our bellies. There were roughly cut holes on the edges of the lip, to let rainwater out.

“I will settle myself there,” Brisbois said, pointing to the hole across the way, which looked out to the back of the cabin. “And you can stay here,” He pointed to the nearest hole. “Do try to look through the hole and only to look above the lip now and then,” he said. “There is no use exposing your head to a casual shot. On the other hand, looking above the lip will give you a panoramic view. So it’s worth looking up through it sometimes. Just not always.”

He went and laid down across from me. We were over the little protrusion that was the bathroom of the unit, so our legs lay side by side, while we looked over opposite sides of the building. I had a pretty good view of the front door, and I assumed he had a good view of the alley behind, the one that ran between the cabins of the motel.

I settled myself down and took a cautious look above the lip of the roof. Everything was still, almost too still, in the near vicinity. There was no one out, no one on the streets. “I don’t understand,” I said. “Doesn’t this place do any business?”

Brisbois made a sound like a cough. “Oh, yes, but that’s because it’s just up from the port. Normally it rents its rooms by the hour. But the traffic in and out of the port has stopped, and I suspect any strangers caught here are lying low, not out looking for company.”

“Oh,” I said. “A whore motel? In Eden—I mean, where I come from —”

“Yes?”

“Well, I suppose there are some like this,” I said. “But the ones you hear about are the really nice ones. The better sort of courtesans tend to… you know…purchase permanent rooms in places with all the amenities so their clients feel pampered.”

There was a long silence and then he said, in a tone of hesitancy, “Prostitution is legal where you come from?”

“We don’t have laws,” I said.

“Oh, we do. And around here it’s illegal. I’m sure the better sort of prostitute has nicer places to take her clients, but this is pretty average for your normal, run-of-the-mill prostitute. And run-of-the-mill prostitutes aren’t doing much business just now, certainly not in the usual way.”

I looked again and everything around seemed peaceful. I doubted Brisbois had chosen this particular motel at random. The place was on a little rise, probably built on top of a set of warehouses or something else that was a half-level up, and therefore commanding a broader view of the neighborhood than any other place around.

In the distance there were shouts, and flares. It looked like something being set on fire, because the flares were too large for a burner, but it all seemed very far away, and nearby there was no sound at all, save a cricket chirping somewhere to the left of the building.

I heard Brisbois say a couple of words. At least I thought they were words, but they were in no language I knew. I turned around to see him doing something with a ring on his finger. He said another couple of words that were in no known language, then let go of his ring, picked up his burner and looked over the lip of the building, while he said, “Sending a message to Jonny and Mailys.”

“I figured,” I said.

There was a short silence, and then he said, “I thought while Simon is asleep, I might explain to you…anything that you don’t understand or don’t know about what is going on.”

My turn to cough, to disguise a laugh. “You’re just afraid of what I might do if I don’t know and run off my own.”

“Do you blame me?”

“Perhaps not, but answer me this first: you gave the Patrician some type of knockout injector?”

“Yes.”

“What if we do spot hostiles, and it’s someone we must run from in haste?”

He made a sound like a hiss. “Madame, I am not stupid. It is unlikely we’ll have to run in a hurry, or at least in that much of a hurry, but if we have to run, then I give the Patrician an antidote.”

“You’re carrying an awful lot of those around?”

He chuckled. “Half a dozen. Mostly with a view to disabling guards, if needed, but also, I’ve known the Patrician for a long time.”

“How long?”

“In a manner of speaking, his entire life,” he said.

“But he didn’t know about you,” I protested.

“Well, he did and he didn’t. I’m sure he’d seen me a few times. You see, I was raised in a crèche controlled by Doctor Dufort. And the Patrician was attended by the doctor as his physician, so I’m sure our paths crossed now and then, but—”

“But I doubt he paid me much attention. Or knew who lived in the crèche, or what he had in common with us. You see, for the rest of the world, and for us too, for most of our childhood we were just orphans, abandoned or surviving parents who had died, and being raised by the doctor out of charity. We called him father—”

“Did he know?” I asked.

“What that we were created in a lab? Yes, I believe so. Since he oversaw the process, how could he avoid knowing?”

“I’m not wholly stupid, you know. That was not what I was asking. I was asking if he knew about what the Good Men did, creating children clones of themselves and then having their brain transplanted into their putative son’s body, as a way to immortality.”

Brisbois hissed again, but this time it seemed like a sharp intake of breath between the teeth. “The doctor is not a monster,” he said.

“I didn’t think he was. Not in your opinion, at least, since you made a special trip to save him, and you still call him father, but I wondered if he knew. People—” I said, partly sincerely and partly trying to ease his qualms and get him to talk. I felt like I only had a partial picture of this strange place and the relationship between people, and if I was going to survive this very dangerous time, I needed to know more. “People do strange things when under restricted circumstances. Even good people can do…things under pressure of the circumstances, and if I understand the Good Man regime, no one was quite free.”

“Only those who chose not to play along with society or established norms,” he said. “Difficult for a medical man. But no, I don’t think he knew. I think he found out after the Good Man found out. Simon, I mean.”

“Why? I mean, why do you think that?” I looked up and again everything was deserted, though it seemed to me I heard steps some streets off.

“Because I was there when Simon told him, and Father’s face…” He sighed. “He thought, you see, that since the Good Man was a Mule—yes, he knew that—and he couldn’t reproduce with a normal woman because of the

stops built into his kind, he had to create a clone of the Good Man, and implant it under the guise of a routine exam, in the Good Man's wife, and that way he'd assure succession and stability. He never knew…He had been Simon's physician since Simon was very small, and he had looked after him. He considered Simon, like us, almost one of his children. I've never seen anyone so shocked as when he found out what the plans for Simon were. When Simon told him, I mean."

"How did Simon find out? Or did he only find out when his father was incapacitated."

Brisbois snorted. "I found out what I was at eleven. Father—Doctor Dufort, I mean, told me. He told us when he thought we were ready for it."

"I didn't—"

"Ask? No, but it's the only way I know to answer what you did ask. Listen. He told me when I was eleven. He told Rose a little before that. What was explained to me, and probably to her, too, was that since the Patrician was enhanced, he needed servants who were enhanced too. Also, that other Good Men had enhanced servants, and so our Good Man needed to have them too, to defend himself from attempted takeovers. True as far as that goes, you know? Even if it were possible to completely ban bioimproving technology, no Good Man could ever trust any other Good Man to keep his word and not to create his own improved army to take the others out. There have been fewer wars recently, but in the early days many of the Good Men got taken out as others conquered their domains. I think about seventy of the Mules got left behind on Earth when the *Je Reviens* took off. This is not an accurate count, but the best guess we can make. They then took over the power structure, half of which was already… dictatorships by someone called a Good Man, which ironically was supposed to have the connotation of not genetically modified. But then they consolidated by killing each other and invading.

"When a Good Man takes over the domain of another, the normal procedure is to kill all the upper servants, precisely because they are assumed to be enhanced, or made stronger or smarter. Either that, or they are descended from people who were enhanced and stayed behind to serve the Good Man. In any case, they will be the most capable of the people on the seacity. To take them out is to decapitate the structure, which means it can then be replaced with the invader's people.

“Only Good Man St. Cyr didn’t have many hereditary servitors. I think…” He was quiet a little while, then sighed, like a man reluctantly facing a necessity. “Do you know what—I mean, do you know what the job was that the man who would become Good Man St. Cyr was created for?”

“Yes. Spying, I think.”

Another long hesitation. “Sort of. Yes, spying was part of the job, but it was, mostly, general intelligence, assassination, covert warfare. Spying, yes, surely, but also targeted killing and…” He hissed air out between his teeth again, a disconcerting sound. “You see, I never knew the former Good Man. Not…closely. I knew him as a ruler, and I heard some things about him from Doctor Dufort. Doctor Dufort’s family, of course, had served the Good Man, but they weren’t exactly the same as palace servitors. Also, someone grossly enhanced and deviated from normal human genetics, if he’s at all smart, tries to keep alive the man who comes from the family which knows his makeup and how to treat any peculiar problems.”

“He didn’t keep other servitors alive? No hereditary servants?”

“I—No. I don’t know precise details, except when I became head of the secret police I discovered that the former Good Man was paranoid. More paranoid than is normal for a Good Man, that is,” he said. “He would trust someone or some family for a while and then decide they had abused his trust and confidence, and banish them and have them assassinated or executed. He was always afraid, I think, that anyone beyond Doctor Dufort might figure out what he was. I don’t know what the man saw during the Turmoils. Simon doesn’t seem to be…that way. And I wonder if it was acquired and if—” a sigh.

I took the opportunity to take another look around over the lip of the building. There was a couple walking down a street two streets away. I could see their heads, though nothing more. They were walking away from us.

“It can’t be helped,” Brisbois said. “If he’s going to crack with this, then he’s going to crack. And if he cracks, then…I don’t know what I’ll have to do. This is part of the reason I agreed with his plan to join the Sans Culottes and foment the revolution, so he could leave his post and go off and be a colonist in the newly recovered territories.” He chuckled. “Mind you, I can’t imagine Simon being a colonist anywhere even semi-wild, but that was his idea. Which, coming from a man who spent a substantial portion of yesterday trying to find his cat—”

“Mephistopheles?” I asked. Mephy was Simon’s cat, and sometimes I thought the only creature he really loved. A big black tom with an evil disposition, he shared Simon’s bed most nights, and always worried Simon when he disappeared. I felt guilty that I had totally forgotten Mephy’s existence in the middle of worry for his master.

“Yes. We haven’t found him, but at least there is no indication he died. He might not even have been near the palace. He’s a tomcat and he roams. But the Patrician worries for him. In the…in the original revolution there were episodes of cat killing, and the Patrician fears this might come to pass here as well. He fears it’s baked into the format. It’s not rational, but—

“No. But leaving aside the possibility that Simon will become paranoid due to the present difficulties, you meant to—that is, I asked how Simon found out what his father’s plan was. You said it was before his father died.”

“He’s never explicitly told me, but I think his stepmother must have told him. How she found out, I don’t know. Good Man St. Cyr had her killed. She was not the woman who had borne Simon, who St. Cyr had had killed earlier. The same thing that affected all his close relationships affected the women he married, too. He’d start suspecting them, and…Well, Simon’s stepmother gave birth to a little girl. In the ensuing…drama, I think she found out what the setup was and told Simon what his fate was to be, before she was killed with her daughter. Simon—” He stopped again, for a while.

“When I was fifteen, Doctor Dufort told me what I was and that my purpose was to serve Good Man St. Cyr. This was around the time when Simon was born, so I always had a great interest in the news of the heir and what he might be doing, because he was to be my future…*boss* is an inadequate word and *lord* not quite right. Because the Good Man is fully autocratic, if you are one of his dedicated servants, either created on purpose or descended from the Mules’ servants, you can’t really change allegiance, and you are somewhere between an employee and a slave. The Good Man has full power of life and death over you. Anyway, the doctor told me so skillfully that I never thought that there was anything wrong with what I was and what I was meant to be. Not at least until I was nineteen and I fell in love.”

“With Madame Parr?”

“Yes. Rose…Back then her views on enhanced people and normal people were different. She thought we should rule them just by virtue of being enhanced. She thought it was disgusting that people were allowed to just be born naturally. She was supposed to be a secretary of the Good Man. No, that’s not exactly right. She was supposed to supervise the Good Man’s offices, his clerks, his archivists. Anyway, she saw just enough to think the Good Man was a fool, and the regime full of waste. She started a small revolutionary group. We called ourselves ‘The Just.’”

“We?”

“I was…I’d fallen in love with her, and I would do whatever she wanted. When we came of age, we got married secretly, because our position was complicated. We were technically just orphans rescued by the state, and as such free to marry like anyone else. On the other hand, we were what we knew ourselves to be, and our whole lives had been controlled from birth, so the idea that we were free to marry seemed like a joke. We weren’t free to do much of anything. So we got married, and I visited her in her rooms in the palace, as she visited me in mine. For ten years, we had this revolutionary group, but we never did much more than distribute pamphlets, and try to divulge some of the worst things the Good Man was doing. Like when he arrested someone secretly.

“Honestly, I don’t know how we weren’t caught. Then again, I should say I’m not sure that’s all we did. That’s all *I* did and all I knew about. I have no idea, though, if Rose’s activities were as restricted as my own.”

I looked over and surveyed the street. It was very quiet. From somewhere far off came the sound of raucous singing.

“I learned a lot of what I would call everyday deception and agitation,” he said. “Had to, since even distributing pamphlets or meeting with other malcontents was illegal and we needed to evade arrest. I know how to disguise myself, and how to pass unnoticed in a crowd.”

There was a sound of an explosion in the distance and I looked over to verify, but the street was still deserted.

“The thing is,” Brisbois said, like a man speaking out of a dream, “that when Simon found out about the…about what his father meant to do with him, he got in touch with Rose. And Rose took the specifications for what we were to do to the Good Man. There was a bomb planted in his flyer, but

that was a ruse. A diversion. He wasn't in his flyer at the time. The flyer was remote-controlled.

"You see, we needed an explanation for his having suffered brain damage, but the damage needed to be very specific, the sort of thing that would damage his brain, but not so that he would die, and which would give hope that he might be able to come back to full functioning. Simon figured that this was the one way that the other Good Men would not take over. St. Cyr had friends and allies among them, who would not encourage an attack on Simon and Liberte as long as there was a chance St. Cyr would come back. I'm not quite sure why, to be fair, but I think there were secrets held over people's heads, and things that would come out one way or another. So, while I was instructed to put a bomb in the Good Man's flyer, and I was told that it was meant to kill him, Jean Dechausse and Madame—I think by then he was already her lover and this was part of an elaborate plan to rid herself of me—applied the damage very carefully. He was then transported to the site of the crash and it was all staged.

"But I was traced as the planter of the bomb, and Simon had to, of course, throw me in jail." There was a long silence. "Simon St. Cyr is not his father. It bothered him that the hit he'd ordered resulted in what was objectively an innocent man being condemned to death. As soon as he'd gotten full control of the reins of power in the seacity, he made it his business to seek me out in my jail cell. He refused to sign my warrant. He brought me out. He gave me a new identity.

"At first I trusted him no more than his father trusted anyone. How could I? After all, I'd just been set up to die by my wife, the person I trusted most in the world, the person I'd have followed into the jaws of hell. And I knew what his father had been. But we talked, and I realized that Simon was not his father. I realized that he truly had not meant for anyone to die, not even to save himself from death. He thought he was hiring a hit from experienced revolutionaries that would keep everyone safe from harm. He couldn't understand how I'd got captured, and he didn't want me to die for it. So, new position, new face, new name."

"New face?"

He snorted. "Actually, most of it was done while in jail. There were… interrogation sessions, before I was convicted. This was before Simon had taken over. Before they gave up hope of bringing his father back. My

features were permanently rearranged which, with a very little work from a skilled surgeon, became just a rather unremarkable face."

"Ah," I said. I'd wondered why someone enhanced would look like he did. It wasn't that all enhanced people were beautiful, but most weren't actually homely. He was. Something had been bothering me, in the back of my mind. "The double…Am I right to understand that the man to be executed in Simon's place was a clone double? Or was he just some person whose features had been rearranged by plastic surgeons?"

"No. It was what we call a blank double. Yes, a clone. Not really acephalous but with no more brain development than it takes to keep it alive and in more or less decent health. There is no thinking, no personality there. Not even walking. We spread the word that he'd had a stroke, in fear at the invasion of the palace. They believed it."

The idea made me squirm. Even without a brain, it seemed evil to create persons who…weren't. And then to dispose of them.

"They were created as backups for Simon's father," he said. "As doubles of Simon, the same age he is. In case something happened to Simon that prevented the transplant, so his father didn't have to die, if his transplant had to happen as an emergency." An odd snort, hiccup, chuckle. "I understand most Good Men create these backups. Well, maybe not Good Man Sinistra. Creating a female once, and having her not die or be sterile, was enough of a miracle."

"But," I said. "I'd thought of that, but it makes no sense."

"How not?" he asked.

"If they can have these blanks, why take the risk of creating a fake son, with his own independent life, one who might, you know, find out as Simon did? Why the whole elaborate charade?"

"Because they aren't doing this in the open. They're doing it in secret and behind everyone's back. People aren't supposed to know the Good Men are the Mules or, as they called themselves, the *biolord*s, climbed to the top of the pile again. They have to pretend to be normal people with a normal family and have a normal, visible heir who will take over after them when they die. I mean, Mules can live twice or three times the normal span. They wouldn't need cloning if both Mules and cloning weren't illegal. As it is, they need fake sons, and an entire architecture of normal succession. There are other reasons—I understand—there are failings to these all but

acephalous clones. They don’t have the right muscle mass, and there are problems with the attachment sites for the nerve endings. In fact, if anyone were forced to use one—and there’s rumors one or two of the Good Men have done so over the centuries, though I can’t, of course, verify anything—it would be the same as recovering from a near-fatal stroke or a brain injury. It would be neither easy nor simple. Certainly not guaranteed. So, a “real son” with a real history is vastly preferable. And this is why the doubles were Simon’s age. *Were*, because most of them were in Doctor Dufort’s lab, which had been blown up.”

I was about to ask him if that was indeed so, and if a son couldn’t be faked with public appearances by these clones, when he suddenly said something in that tongue I didn’t understand. Another voice answered with an incomprehensible word, and Brisbois said, *“Merde.”* He was moving, turning around, on his belly. I did too, to face him, just as he opened the trapdoor in the ceiling of the bathroom, and said, “We’re still safe, but they are on their way. Our moles in the Sans Culottes have passed word to Jonny. Madame knows the Patrician is here. She knows they beheaded a fake. She couldn’t care less about us, or where we are, but she cares about him, and she wants to eliminate him. We must clear out.”

“The brooms?” I said.

He shook his head. I figured he had a plan, but I said, “Simon is drugged into sleep.”

“Yes. And he’s had a couple of hours. I have the antidote.”

I wondered how he was going to deal with a combative Simon who would rightly feel betrayed at having been drugged into sleep against his will. I shouldn’t have worried. Brisbois had that covered.

The antidote left Simon oddly sleepy and compliant, blinking his eyes in confusion, and easily led, as we climbed back up to the roof—Brisbois pulled Simon up by main force—and then Brisbois produced a very light and compact rope ladder—it looked like it was made of transparent, very strong filaments—from some inner pocket.

I said, “A rope ladder?” as he was securing the thing to one of the cut outs on the edge of the roof.

“The well-equipped revolutionary is always prepared for a quick getaway,” he said. “Seriously, even though I see no one and you see no one,

Jonny says the door to the motel is watched, so we must escape through the back, without being noticed. If we're lucky."

Brisbois went down the ladder first, which made me wonder about both his loyalty and his chivalry, until I realized that climbing down a rope ladder might be a slightly too complex task for someone in Simon's drugged state to execute. He stumbled from step to step, with Alexis's very careful instructions, and when he fell the last few rungs. Brisbois caught him and set him on the ground, as I scrambled down.

We had no more than stepped on the filthy ground of the alley than I heard the sound of boots—heavy boots—running. Several alleys away, but headed for the door of the motel.

I looked at Brisbois. He nodded, once, and did something—some sort of special tug to his rope ladder that removed it from its attachment. He shoved it in a big mass into his clothes and then, without exchanging a word, both of us knowing exactly what needed to be done, we each grabbed Simon by the arm and ran.

I was very grateful that both them were enhanced, and that we could run very fast.

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The Big Time

IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO RUN WITH SOMEONE ELSE STEERING WHEN YOU DON'T know the way. Particularly if three of you are running and only one leading. Not impossible, as such, mind, but very, very difficult. A dozen times I stumbled as Brisbois pulled us in a completely new direction, taking Simon and myself off at unexpected angles.

The result was that, by the time we found ourselves at the edge of the sea, I had no idea how we got there. I hoped that meant that neither would the people following us be able to find us, though of course that was no guarantee. I mean, they might have known where we were going all along.

But as far as I could tell, no one followed. We'd come to the end of a blind, twisting alley which might very well have been not even an alley at all but someone's footpath from a beach house to the sea, and stopped so suddenly I almost toppled face first into the drink.

Brisbois turned and barked a question at me. It was so sudden that I processed it not as words but as sounds. Or perhaps he'd used the patois of the seacity and my imprinting was starting to wear off. I had a moment of panic over this, and then he repeated, "Can you swim?"

I blinked. "Yes."

It wasn't a given. In Eden, water is the most expensive commodity, and most people never see enough of it together to learn to swim. I never had. But Simon had been amused at my reaction to the ocean and had arranged for me to have lessons.

Brisbois said, "Follow me." He dove into the ocean, tugging Simon along with him.

As I dove in and swam under the cold water, I had a moment of panic, because in the water at night, lit only by faint moonlight from above, I thought I wouldn't be able to see Brisbois, much less follow him. Then I

felt a touch on my shoulder, and a slight pull. I had to assume the large, calloused hand was Brisbois's.

I don't know how he herded both Simon and myself to safe port. After a while I could see them, like shapes in the water, and swam on my own, until we came to something like a rock.

It seemed like Brisbois had hit the rock hard and then the rock swallowed him. But people who've been swallowed don't reach back to grab someone else and pull them in. I assumed there was some sort of water-sealing membrane there. Or at least I hoped so, because otherwise I was going to hit my head really hard.

I couldn't really see what I was swimming into. We were over ten feet down, and it was at best a murky, diffused light, kind of like a candle seen through several layers of dark cloth. But I could remember perfectly where Alexis and Simon had disappeared, and I plunged in after them in the exact spot.

Something opened and rolled over my body. The other side was dry and lit, and I put my hands up to catch myself, as I pulled myself from a flexible membrane, dragging my legs in.

A bit of water had come in with the three of us, and there was maybe an inch on the floor of a small chamber lit with what seemed like, after the darkness outside, blazing light, but was in fact a sort of diffuse and greenish illumination.

As I came in, Brisbois shouted something that I couldn't understand.

Simon and Brisbois were standing, with their hands up, and I'd no more come to my feet than a voice spoke from somewhere above. "And you too, Madame, hands up."

Brisbois made a sound at the back of his throat that indicated he was at the very end of his patience. "This is stupid," he shouted to somewhere above him, his voice sounding like he would very much like to blow up into a series of screams. "Why are we not being let in?"

The voice from the other side sounded vaguely amused, but mostly very tired. "Because the Patrician is dead, so when he swims up, we have to wonder about his real identity."

"Am I also dead?" Brisbois bellowed. "I said the right countersign."

"Yes, indeed," the voice said. "Which is why we haven't filled the chamber with water and locked the entrances yet. There's always an

opportunity for that."

"I talked to Jonny," Brisbois said. "He knew we were coming this way. He should have alerted you."

"And that's the rub, because he didn't," the voice said. "And now we can neither reach Monsieur de LaForce nor Mademoiselle Bonheur. Therefore, we can't verify where he is nor what he told you. And finding the Patrician alive after we saw him dead is, pardon me, a rather unbelievable thing. Doctor Dufort, who is also missing, has the capability to perform surgery to make almost anyone look like anyone, and it is not much to say that he could have created replicas of the Patrician and Brisbois."

"In two days?" Brisbois asked.

"Who knows how long this has been planned," the voice said, and the tone had a hint of a very Gallic shrug behind it.

Brisbois took in breath, and I felt like the yell that came out would dwarf all past screams in the history of man, but then Simon, who looked far more alert than earlier, reached out and touched Alexis. Just a small touch on the arm. Then he said, in his reasonable voice, "Nothing is going to be resolved through intimidation, Alexis."

"I set up this system and this—" Alexis said.

"Yes, and? How can they know that?" Simon said. He glanced up at the ceiling, and looked more like himself than he'd looked since I'd met him again after seeing his putative execution. Perhaps the two hours of sleep had been enough to restore him. Or perhaps it was the plunge in cold water. But he looked awake, alert, and back to his normal poise. "Gentlemen, we are at your mercy. Is there some way we can prove our identity, barring finding Monsieur LaForce and Mademoiselle Bonheur?"

Someone said something from the speaker in the ceiling. I didn't understand it. It had a vague sense of French and the impression that it was unbelievably rude.

Simon rolled his eyes and cleared his throat. "I'm afraid, gentlemen—and I surely hope there are no ladies present—that whatever you've heard about the original design of Mules, we are not actually that flexible."

There was a dead, sullen silence. I got the impression someone had made what they believed was a very clever joke and were shocked that Simon hadn't deigned to show either offense or shock.

Alexis's low, muttered "*merde!*" was followed by a sneered "infants." Just about captured my feelings. I knew what they'd told me in Olympus about my clothes drying very fast, but I was going to assume there was a limit to this capacity. I probably would have dried quickly after a mild rain. Or perhaps it was the salt in the water that had defeated the mechanisms for drying and cleaning the clothes. All I knew is that they were wet, itchy and heavy and made me feel very cold. I was starting to shiver.

Another voice came over the speaker, this one sounding somehow older and more composed than the others. "Monsieur Brisbois, Patrician, Madame, I beg your pardon, I was asleep."

Alexis let out air, with an explosive sound, giving the impression he had been holding it in for days. "Basil, *grace a dieu*," he said. "Could you please let us in?"

Basil cleared his throat. "Well, Alexis," he said. "My subordinates might not have handled this well, but the point is, you know, that they *do* have a point. One of you is supposed to be dead and the other two, at least if the lady is the one who was described to me, were seen leaving the seacity and have been traced, if bank records can be followed, all the way to Olympus, from which stories of their being taken in by Goo—by Lucius Keeva have also been relayed to us. What are we supposed to believe? That the Patrician wasn't killed, that it was just someone who looked a great deal like him? And that you and Madame Sienna, once safely in a noninsane land, and in the possession of enough credits for a comfortable life for a good many years, came back into this?"

Alexis's "Yes," was echoed by my "I had to save Simon."

This earned me a radiant smile, from the quite unremarkable face, and his brown eyes narrowed a little in appreciation.

But it was Simon who spoke, once more proving that whatever else he was, he was someone designed to react calmly and keep his head under stress. "I understand your problem, Messieurs," he said, his voice even and polite. "Have you considered genetic tests?"

Another long silence and then the same voice came again, in a pensive tone, "We'd have to send someone in there to collect samples."

"Indubitably," Simon said. "And?"

"All three of you, if you are who you claim to be, can move faster than any normal human being and a lot of the bioed ones."

“And?”

“You could overpower and take hostage anyone we send in.”

Simon rolled his eyes. He had this way of rolling his eyes that would relegate his interlocutor to infant class. “Must I do all the thinking for you? You said before that you had the ability to lock both doors—I presume you have now—and fill the chamber with water. Am I to assume you don’t have the ability to, say, fill the chamber with sleeping gas of some sort?”

Something like a whispered conversation was heard from above.

Simon spoke, his voice very clear, very loud, each word carefully pronounced, as though he were speaking to someone who was not quite intelligent enough to follow adult speech. “You could keep an eye on us, and should we overpower your envoy, you’d know for a fact we were impostors. You could knock us all out, and kill us, and take back your little lamb. Alternately, you could knock us out right now and test us while we’re __”

“No,” Brisbois shouted.

“Why not?” Simon said. “If they are our people, and you seem to recognize some of them, and you say you created this hellish place, so clearly they are, then why not trust them to do this?”

“What if they were infiltrated? What if they…”

The last conscious thought I remember having was: *I smell mint.*

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Adept’s Gambit

I WOKE WITH THE SOUND OF SOMEONE RETCHING NEAR ME, AND SOMEONE ELSE, A male voice, speaking in soothing apologetic tones, too far away for me to distinguish the words.

Coming to full consciousness, I realized I was lying atop the covers on a bed, and that someone had undressed me. My immediate thought was that someone was going to die.

Where I was raised, nudity was simply another choice of wear. A small colony with almost no crime, it was the sort of place where people wore what they wanted or nothing at all. This might also have been an effect of having mostly bioimproved people or people who were descended from bioimproved people. Not only were the original settlers of Eden likely people who hadn’t fit very well into normal society and thus had gotten used to making their own rules, but probably most of them were better looking than average and had been raised with no rules of modesty.

At least, that was the explanation I’d formed, over time, for while in Eden being naked was not a big deal, on Earth it had all these under- and overtones of shame and sexual interest. I didn’t fully understand it. Perhaps it’s not possible to fully understand or feel such things unless one grew up with them, but I understood enough to tell someone had taken liberties. My clothes and boots had been removed, and I was wearing something diaphanous that felt like silk: a loose white robe, with delicate floral embroidery around the edge of the neck and the hem.

I realized the room had felt like it was spinning around and round when it stopped. Then I realized that the voices were coming from an adjacent room and that the voice speaking just then was definitely Simon’s, as it said, “You deserved it for giving me knock-out juice. What possessed you?”

“You needed to sleep,” Brisbois’s voice, sounding shaky. “You probably still do, you damn stubborn bastard.”

There was the sound of running water. I dragged myself upright and turned in the direction of the voices. Brisbois was rinsing his mouth at a sink. He looked grayish-pale. I assumed the sounds of vomiting I'd heard had come from him. Simon was watching him. Despite his teasing words, his eyes were observant, slightly concerned. "How in hell could I have known you were allergic to sleeping gas?" he asked. "And how the hell does anyone even know that? How often were you knocked out to know this?"

Brisbois rose from the vanity, wiping first his hands and then his mouth on a small hand towel that looked all the smaller for being used by an outsize person. "Many," he said, and twisted his lips in what was half smile and half grimace. "Think about it. Think about my activities before… we met."

"Oh," Simon said, which is when he saw me. A smile broke on his face, as he gave me the once over. "Hello, Zen. Is there anything you don't look beautiful in?"

I ignored that. I figured Simon flirted the same way he breathed and couldn't help himself and not do one or the other more or less by reflex.

"Alexis is allergic to sleeping gas?" I asked, and then over Simon's "Apparently," I continued, "And we were proven to be ourselves. Which is good, because I was starting to doubt it."

Brisbois gave me a wide grin. He said something that sounded like "Someone's head is going to roll for this."

I realized the two men were wearing something that looked much like the disposable work suits. "Certainly the head of whoever provided us clothes," I said. "How come neither of you two are wearing translucent clothes?"

"Would you want us to be?" Simon asked, with a crooked smile and a narrowing of the eyes, while Brisbois said, "Clearly the gas has affected her mind. And I think there's another explanation for the clothes, Madame Sienna. Mine and Simon's were thoroughly ruined. The young woman who was here when we woke said something about yours being self-repairing given time, and so they'd just give you something to cover up while it was repairing itself."

"Oh," I said, absorbing that at least it seemed likely we'd all been undressed and dressed while unconscious, and that likely—quite likely

from what Brisbois said—I'd been undressed by a female. So the courtesies were being observed, which was good. It had been my experience when people on Earth violated the nudity taboo without thought, things were very dark indeed.

Someone knocked at the door. The person who came in was small and slight, and had eyes of an indeterminate color between gray and blue. She was carrying—folded—my suit from Olympus. "We removed most of the water and it fixed itself," she said, setting my suit down on the bed and smiling at Brisbois. "I see you are recovered, sir. The commanders are waiting for you in the Blue Room for a conference."

She smiled and bowed slightly at us, and left. I retained the clear impression that as far as she was concerned, Brisbois was the important person here and that Simon and I barely rose to the level of interesting.

After she left, Brisbois said, "I'd best go to this Blue Room, wherever the hell that is."

"We'll find it together," Simon said, his voice very even. "And, on the way, perhaps you can explain to me how you came to build secret shelters I wasn't informed about, and exactly who has been paying for people to staff them. I think it will be a very interesting conversation."

"Don't be an idiot," Brisbois was curt and the sound of someone who was one more inconvenience away from screaming was back in his voice. "I didn't know where this was either. That was the whole point. Had I known where it was, I would have brought the people I rescued to it instead of coordinating submarine rescues."

"Am I crazy, or are you?" Simon asked. "You created an underground—well, under-ocean—secret base you knew nothing about?"

"Of course," Brisbois said. "Several, actually. I wanted them to be completely secret and effective if everything else failed. I was an obvious target once I figured the Sans Culottes were in negotiations with another revolutionary group that was almost certainly what remained of the Just. I knew they'd take me out first. Or interrogate me. Or try to. You were another person they'd almost certainly detain and interrogate. It was important that you not know it existed, just as it was important that I not know where it was, precisely. Well, where they were. There are several of these, and only a few people know where each of them is, never the same people for more than one. And as for staffing it and paying for it, you have,

of course. Remember, I was bitten by a secret organization before, and would have died if you hadn't rescued me. This was done in furtherance of your plans, and in case they escaped your control."

"As they have," Simon said. "Damn you."

"You're welcome."

Halfway through their conversation, I'd realized they were going to try to leave without me. And while I wasn't sure I should be in on that conference, I was going to be. For one, I was not going to be left behind by two men who were determined to protect me from everything. And for another, if I was going to help with the stabilizing of Liberte, I had to know what was happening and what could be done. I knew they meant well, but I wasn't their daughter, their sister, nor their anything. I had no reason to trust their judgement over mine.

I had to decide on my own what risks I would take and which were acceptable. But more importantly, I had to know. I'd made great mistakes because I hadn't known of Simon's plans. I'd risked Jonathan LaForce and Mailys and wasn't even sure they were still alive. I was not going to continue fighting with both feet in a sack.

At a guess, leaving me behind was Simon's idea, while Alexis felt that Simon and I—both—needed to be protected from every possible danger.

I undressed and started dressing quickly. When Simon said, "Damn you," he chanced to look over at me, when I was in my underwear—well, in someone's underwear since I'd woken in it—and getting ready to slip on the coveralls I'd worn to the seacity.

His jaw dropped and he jumped back, out of reach of Brisbois's arm. "Don't you dare," he said. "Fool me once, and I'm willing to believe you had good intentions. Fool me twice, hit me with an injector again and I slip a dagger in your back while you sleep."

Brisbois said, "What? I'm not trying to distract—" and turned. By then I was mostly dressed, and fastening the suit down the front. "I didn't plan this," he said, in earnest protest. "Maybe I should have, and have been ready to put you to sleep. Simon, please listen to me. It is better if you stay here, better if these people don't see you face-to-face; better if they're not too sure where you are or if you're even alive. It's almost impossible to run a secret organization, even a secret military outfit, without enemy penetration."

“And? If we’re not going to use me, really use me, as an asset, why am I here and not panning for gold in the territories?”

“Panning for what? You know someone really should have kept you from reading crazy stuff in childhood.”

Simon frowned. “Never mind. The point is we’re either going to use me or we’re not. Your decision. If we’re not going to use me, can I get a submarine to take me to parts unknown? If we’re going to use me—if my presence is absolutely necessary to rescuing the people who rely on me, can we cut the crap and just go to this conference in the Blue Room or wherever?”

“Not without me,” I said, as I closed the last fastener.

They both looked at me, and Simon opened his mouth. But Brisbois spoke first. “No, Simon. It’s no use. First because if we are being serious, then we’re going to need all the help we can get. And second because I have a strong feeling it’s absolutely no use. Not when Madame Sienna has decided on something.”

Simon looked dubious, but then he nodded. “We go to the conference room then.” A slow grin twisted his lips as he squeezed my upper arm. “They’ll never know what hit them.”

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Trapped in Shadowland

THE THREE OF US WALKED, BAREFOOT, OUT OF THE ROOM, AND ASKED THE FIRST person we met—a young woman in green coveralls, who seemed to know Brisbois and recognize Simon, whom she graced with a small smile—where the Blue Room was.

The barefoot thing bothered me. Surely they could have brought us shoes, when they brought us clothes?

On the other hand, I felt more naked than that because, for the first time since the night of the party, I was without a burner. I half-hoped one of the men had a burner on him, but I suspected not, since we'd all been stripped and given our present clothes.

If I knew Simon, he had probably been a walking arsenal. I'd never known him when he wasn't carrying enough weapons for a small army, much less when he was carrying none. And there, at the back my head was the question: why had they not returned our weapons? Or at least not returned mine?

They had, after all, made sure we were who we said we were. So they could trust us. But could we trust them?

I wanted to talk about it, to ask the two men if they had weapons, and if not, why not, but I didn't dare. I felt the only thing worse than being scared that we were all unarmed was knowing for a fact that we were all unarmed.

The Blue Room was at the end of a long hallway without doors, where the walls looked like they'd been carved from rock and then coated in gold. I had a momentary pang of something not quite grief. When Len and I had leased our very first ship for harvesting pods from Earth orbit—all the ships belonged to the Energy Board, and the best we could do was lease from them, but most of the leases were semi-permanent, as long as the couple worked—we couldn't afford much, but in this, our first home, we wanted to

have something special. So we'd gilded the walls of the first room in the ship, partly because it was also the smallest room in the ship and we could afford it.

At the same time, the back of my neck was prickling, the hair trying to rise. That corridor with no doors seemed like a perfect way to corral us in such a way we couldn't easily escape.

The door at the end was half open, and Brisbois opened it completely and stepped in. One thing I'll say for the man. He had the gift of filling to capacity any room he entered.

When we arrived, the room contained only three men, who had been seated before we entered. It was a vast room and looked like it had been designed for large meetings. A long table and many chairs could have accommodated a couple dozen people. But once Brisbois stepped into it, and looked around as though inspecting it for stolen accoutrements, the room was filled to capacity.

Simon and I pushed in, on either side, and I suspected looked much like afterthoughts to Brisbois's looming presence. The men who had been sitting looked discomfited too. The three of them were much of a size, and a look, that look saying "trained in fighting." The middle one had jaws like a bulldog, and dark blond hair cut very short. The one on his left had a leaner, longer face and dark hair. The one on the right was slightly shorter than the other two. They all wore the white uniforms that had belonged to Simon's house. And they looked…

I narrowed my eyes as the look found a place in my mind. They looked exactly like naughty children caught misbehaving. Like little boys caught with their hands in the cookie jar. Interesting. I wondered why. And I meant to find out.

They rose—slowly—as we came in. They looked at Simon with narrowed eyes, then at Brisbois evaluating, then at me.

The one in the middle spoke first. I noted that when he spoke he put his hand on his hip, and I suspected under his white uniform hid a holstered weapon. "We didn't expect you, Commander Brisbois," he said. "And we didn't expect"—his eyes slid to Simon—"a lookalike."

Oh. I dropped onto my left foot, ready to spring. That was how they were going to play it, was it? I suspected they were going to find it was not a good idea.

“He is not a lookalike, Baudin, and you know it. Don’t be a fool. You analyzed our genetics.”

Baudin looked confused. It was just a moment. Clearly in his cunning plan to—what, claim that Simon was an impostor?—he’d forgotten what they’d done to allow us in here. But he never admitted a mistake, just said, “And someone who appears to be, from her genetics, Jarl Ingemar, after a very sophisticated sex change operation.”

This got Brisbois to look at me, but only for a second. Like me, surely he could sense the movement in the room as he turned away, and then as he turned back to them. “She’s not Jarl Ingemar,” he said.

“That’s not what the little test told us. And people like *them*—” There was an unholy emphasis on the *them*, and eyes going to myself and Simon —“making themselves female bodies and having their brains transplanted into such bodies is not wholly unheard of. We have heard things…”

I sensed more than saw Simon move, and wondered exactly what he was doing. It was a tiny move. What could he do? It was just us, and armed men. Armed men who might very well be hostile.

The back of my mind was calculating: there were three of them. Likely they were all armed. How to take them out?

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Brisbois said. And then in the tone of someone whose mind had been following the same path ours had. “What exactly has been going on here? And what are you three up to? Precisely?”

If he expected embarrassment or abasement, he didn’t get it. The man on the left smiled, a smile that reminded me of pictures I’d seen of weasels. I’d never actually seen a weasel, Eden not having taken many animals, but this was very true to the pictures. “Well, we’ve been thinking.”

“I don’t think so,” Brisbois said. “If you’d been thinking, you wouldn’t be asking us stupid questions, Souci.”

Souci-the-weasel narrowed his eyes. “Oh, no,” he said. The smile was gone but the impression of a small rodent who thinks he has the upper hand remained. “We’ve been thinking about this whole thing. The way we see it, right? What went wrong the last time we purged the Mules from the world, is that the Mules,” he pointed at Simon, “like him, came back and took over again, the way they do. And then they polluted everything again, the way they do.” His mouth quirked. “Which is why we’ve been thinking and planning. Now, this whole thing about enhanced people being evil…” He

shrugged. “The way I see it, Madame has a point. And doesn’t. At this point practically everyone is enhanced, so if we’re a little more enhanced than the others, who cares? It makes us more competent and better able to rule them, while still being human. Human, like he and—” he actually pointed a finger at me, and the finger was trembling—“she aren’t. I mean, if they’re allowed to go on, and you know, reproduce, they’ll just push us off this Earth, so we’ve been talking, and we think it’s better to—”

We never even traded a look. Where we were, it simply wasn’t possible. And though telepathy was bioengineered into bonded nav and pilot couples in Eden, you had to be bonded. Perhaps Simon had the same telepathy engineered into him. It was an open secret some of the old Mules did, and we were their clones, even if I was somewhat modified. But Simon and I didn’t have telepathy. And Brisbois and I surely didn’t.

Yet there was something to the tensing of their muscles—felt, more than seen—or perhaps to the way their smell changed or…I can’t explain it, except to say that I knew I wouldn’t be alone, as I decided this had gone far enough and leapt.

I assumed these people were bioengineered for speed and maybe intelligence, just like we were bioengineered. So, it seemed to me my only hope was surprise.

I flew out at the one who was speaking, feet first, hitting him in the middle of the solar plexus, then rolled to my feet past him. I turned to poke the eyes out of the one in the center, but he wasn’t there. He was attempting to attack Brisbois, who had just taken out the one on the right.

I pulled the gun off the guy I’d knocked to the ground—he wasn’t moving. And Brisbois got the gun off the man he’d subdued. As he did, the guy who’d been in the middle flew out at Brisbois, fists flying.

“Freeze!” that was Simon, standing in the middle of the room, holding a burner. “Freeze or I’ll shoot.”

We froze. The two of us and the man who was still standing of the triumvirate who would…what? Rule the seacity? We had to find out what was going on and exactly how many people in this secret base had gone over to the enemy side. And was it the enemy side, or merely a conspiracy of the loons in here?

But before all that, Simon said, “Zen, would you kindly disarm the large gentleman. Take his obvious weapon and bring it to me. And you,

Alexis, would you search him. You're probably better at that than Zen."

I took the weapon I could see through the man's clothes, and walked backwards, covering the still-conscious Baudin, till I handed the spare burner to Simon, who pocketed his much smaller burner, took the safety off the big guard's burner, and said, "Now, let us talk like civilized people."

Baudin stared. "We searched you," he said. "All of you. You could not have had a concealed weapon."

Simon shrugged. "Ookay. We can discuss that, or we can discuss what exactly you thought you were doing, with whom you thought you were working, and precisely how many people in this base are on your side."

"All of them," Baudin said. "We talked in democratic assembly and we've decided that you are not a true human and we should not be serving you. Particularly since you and she plan on reproducing and replacing all humans."

"News to me," Simon said. He gave me a sideways glance which I couldn't quite read, one that was perhaps half-wishful and half-amused. "Even if we were planning on reproducing, I don't think we'd get so busy as to replace the population of the Earth. And we're not that different. Just a bit enhanced."

"Very enhanced," Baudin said. "Not like the rest of us. We're simply the best of humans, and, being the best of humans, we are their natural rulers, to keep them from the pitfalls of folly that have marred their history. With us in control, there will neither be the heinous excesses of your kind, nor—"

"I don't think he's right," I said.

"About their ruling?" Brisbois asked. He was finishing tying together the hands of the guy I'd hit. His own victim looked dead. "I'm sure he isn't. He's just a little would-be king, trying to knock off those above him and rule in their stead. He would be worse than any Mule, even the really bad ones like Simon's father, begging pardon."

"Begging pardon for what?" Simon said. "I say that about the old bastard myself."

"No," I said. "About everyone being with them, Brisbois," I said. "If they were, why wouldn't they simply have filled the chamber with water when we first came in? Or added something lethal to the air, after it was

proven we're who we say we are. And that man, the one who agreed to the genetic tests—Basil?—I don't think he was intending on killing us. Why bother with the genetic tests?"

Brisbois looked at me, chewing on the corner of his lip.

"Also," he said at last. "People would have arrested us or confined us in a room, not…Simon, keep an eye on this one? I'm going to reconnoiter."

"I can do that," I said.

"No," Simon said. "You might hesitate in shooting someone ostensibly unarmed until it's too late."

"Madame Sienna?" Brisbois said. He whistled air between his teeth. "Brother, she shot a Revolutionary Guard without a second look, just because she thought he might check up on my nonexistent mother."

Simon gave me an appraising look. "That true, Zen?" And then, "But I still think I shouldn't be the one stay—"

"Simon," Brisbois said. "I want both of you to stay. You're too valuable as you are, and Madame Sienna will stay and guard you. I'm the most expendable of us. If I don't come back…" He pulled a ring from his finger and handed it to me. It was one of the cheap com rings. "It dials Jonny LaForce to the right and Mailys to the left. If they answer, tell them it is you, and I suppose they can ask questions to establish that is true. Then tell them I followed through on what Jonathan recommended and what happened.

"And now I'm going to reconnoiter."

"Wait, Alexis," Simon said, urgently. "Why can't we just shoot this bastard and all three of us go?"

"Still too risky for you," Alexis said, even as my stomach did a flip-flop at the idea of shooting an unarmed man because it was inconvenient for him to live. No, it wasn't rational. Did I claim to be rational? Whatever the plotters believed, I was all too human. "You shouldn't be seen, not until we figure out how far the rot goes. Besides," he said, "we too might need a hostage."

He edged towards the door, removed his top and threw it out. Two shots nailed it, one from each side of the hallway.

"Aha," he said. From outside came cautious steps approaching the door. I traded a look with Brisbois. That not-quite-telepathy we had going

still seemed to be working. I gestured with my head towards the right, and he made the like gesture towards the left, the opposite of how we stood.

Look, it was very simple. If Brisbois shot one of them, the other one would come in, burner blazing. We didn't know how fast the other one was, or how competent, but one thing I did know, someone coming into a small room with a burner at full power might hit any of us before we could duck or defend ourselves. If the person wasn't enhanced, this likelihood diminished, but how likely was either of those approaching wouldn't be enhanced? How likely was it that they would have set someone to guard a room full of enhanced people who wasn't himself enhanced?

So the only thing to do was shoot both of them. At the same time. And, fortunately for us, they had given themselves away, moving towards us.

My heart started thudding, fast, loud, so loud that I had trouble thinking past the noise. What if these people were coming toward us for no reason except to check that we were still alive? What if—But the steps were cautious, and they'd shot Brisbois shirt. It was probably burned to pieces, there in the middle of the hallway.

The steps were now close and I had to make a decision. And there was no decision to make. They'd shown ill-intent first, and after all this, in the middle of trap and countertrap, I couldn't let my friends be endangered. Tuning to the noise, with no more thought than it took to point at where the center mass of someone approaching would be likely to be, I put my arm out the door and shot the person on Brisbois's side, at the same time he shot the person on my side.

The reaction came in the form of twin groans, and the one on my side fell—I could hear him or her fall on the other side of the wall. The one on Brisbois's side, though, said, "*Merde*" and jumped forward, filling the doorway, burner blazing.

He sent his burner on a blazing path from side to side, at a level that would have cut us in two. I dropped to my belly, as did Brisbois, avoiding the cutting ray. Simon ducked, then came up, burner in hand, burning a neat hole through the attacker's heart.

At the same time, there was a noise from our prisoner. I can't say what it was now. A grunt, a sound of effort, or even the sound of his feet scuffing the floor.

I just know I turned. Saw him jumping. There was no thought involved. I nailed him through the chest. Brisbois did the same time, a little above my burn hole. The man fell, twitching, a burner in his hand, pointed at Simon, who was turning back from his pivot, looking bewildered.

He looked towards us, his eyes wide, his face pale.

Brisbois got up, dusting himself. “I guess you’re not the only one who can hide weapons, Simon,” he said. Then to me, “You’re well, Madame?”

I stood up, feeling dizzy and confused, but otherwise fine. I looked at the enemy I was supposed to have shot. Unusually tall. I had shot him through the stomach. Enough life left to do damage, if Simon hadn’t got him through the heart. I nodded. The room smelled of ozone and burn.

“*Merde,*” Simon said. It was said in the tone of a deep, philosophical declaration. It was followed by, “We must get out of here.”

Brisbois put out a hand, as though he were about to say, *No, stay.*

But Simon shook his head. “No, you fool. This is not a safe room. It’s a danger room. We can be trapped, in here. Out. Now.”

We went out. We went out without any attempt at disguise, hands on burners, in a triangle formation, eyes cast all around.

If they were going to kill us, they were not going to catch us unawares.

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On Thud and Blunder

WE HADN'T GONE FAR BEFORE SOMEONE SHOT AT US. SIMON SHOT BACK AND A young man dropped from a sort of overhanging walk.

We were in a vast space, rounded and about twenty feet above. I didn't know the plan of this base, of course, but it felt like a sort of central room, with corridors like spokes branching out in every direction.

It struck me as a very dangerous place. It must have struck Brisbois the same way. He looked up at the walk—there were two of them, crisscrossing above, just bridges of planks, with no guardrails. They looked like they'd been put in after the fact, possibly to access newly excavated tunnels in the base of the seacity. This place had a feeling of a warren multiplied by afterthought and necessity.

Brisbois was fumbling in his pants. Don't ask me how, but before throwing out the jacket in the meeting room, he must have found the time to stash his ultra-light rope ladder in his pants and somehow have kept it from being found when we were searched. You'd think I'd have noticed that, but apparently, I was dumber than I thought. He threw it now, with precision, and did something. It anchored above, on one of the walkways.

"Up," he told me. "I'll guard you while you're climbing, and then both of us can guard Simon while he climbs."

So much for chivalry, I thought, half-amused, as I perfectly understood that Simon was more important than I was.

I scrambled up the rope ladder as fast as I could.

Not fast enough, as a burner ray just missed the top of my head, missed because I'd hesitated for a couple of seconds. Perhaps I hesitated because I'd heard the burner fired. I don't know. The problem with very enhanced senses is that unless you're making a particular effort to use them, you make an effort to turn them off. You have to or you can't live, as you

monitor how everyone smells, breathes and moves around you, including those people you can't see.

The thing is, if you're keyed up, you still react to what you heard. You just don't consciously register it.

The burner ray blazed just above my head. I could smell hot hair. And Brisbois fired. I thought I heard the distant sound of a body falling. I didn't turn to look. Before he even said, "Up," in a tone of command, I was running up the rest of the rungs as fast as I could, to lie flat on my belly on the walkway, surveying down below. I saw a glint of movement at the end of a doorway, and aimed for the foremost portion of movement, since I couldn't be sure that it was hostile, but I knew that portion that glinted might be a burner.

I let a burner ray off, and hit the glinting thing, which exploded like a burner will when hit, and at the same time Simon must have shot, because there was a sigh, and the sound of someone falling, and Brisbois said, with a tone of impatience in his voice. "Leave off, Simon. Up. *Fast*."

Simon must have interpreted the "fast" as I would have. So fast that no one could get a shot off while he was on the ladder, because there was a sense of scramble, two burner rays that singed the air just after him, and which were responded to by Brisbois, and then Simon was lying by my side on the plank, smelling of sweat and aftershave, and saying, in his best devil-may-care voice, "Hello, *petite*, you take the right, I take the left."

I looked the way indicated, in time to drop someone with a burner, as I heard the scramble of Brisbois upon the rope ladder.

He landed with a thud somewhere north of me, and started shooting immediately, while saying, between gulps for breath. "Crawl forward, to the cross, move."

"He sure gives orders," Simon said, but I'd already started moving. Stood to reason the part where the two beams crossed was the safest, and besides, if they were going to chop us down, we'd make it as expensive for them as possible. One thing was to chop the walkway half of which would remain suspended, supported by the crossing place, and the other was to cut right through the middle of the cross and cause the entire structure to fall. They might be willing to do that to get to us, but I doubted they'd have the time.

As I crawled forward, I burned someone to my left, without even thinking. I heard Simon follow me, and Brisbois's heavier movement.

Lying flat, shooting whoever poked a head out, Simon said, "Now what?"

Brisbois, instead of answering, bellowed to the surrounding area, "Basil! Basil!"

"What is that going to accomplish?" I asked as I burned someone at our own level, coming out of one of four openings on the second floor.

"Basil is my second in command here," Brisbois said. "And I very much doubt he's been corrupted. Damn it," he said, as he burned someone below and someone above. "Basil!"

I could hear fights everywhere, on all levels, and realized that Brisbois was right. Not everyone had been corrupted. But at the same time, a lot of people had been, if there was fighting all over this place.

"Basil!"

"He might have been corrupted after all," Simon said.

"More likely he's dead," Brisbois said.

But at that moment there was a bellow from somewhere, "I am coming, Brisbois."

The shout distracted us long enough for a bright girl, fast on her feet, to make it running onto the walkway, a burner pointed at us. "Stay where you are. If you—"

So we were valuable as hostages, I thought, and even as I thought it, without moving in a perceptible way, with my hand pressed down and making the slightest gesture, I burned the bright girl at the thighs. She fell, and I'd swear that she was dead before she hit the floor twenty feet below in a shower of blood. The scream from downstairs allowed me to burn a bright boy who'd been advancing close to the wall in the shadows, doubtless till he could get a good aim on us.

"Don't shoot," a voice shouted, and then a word I couldn't understand.

I focused on the corridor below, that the shout had come from. There were a lot of people there. I trained my burner on them, and realized Simon was doing the same.

"Don't shoot," Brisbois yelled.

"What now?" I asked, while Simon said, "Can they be trusted?"

Brisbois said something that sounded like a swear word, followed by “It’s Basil. If he’s been taken over, we’re dead, because everyone will be against us, here.”

“You have our word, unless you do something funny,” Simon yelled.

A group of people emerged into the open space below. Like the men before, they wore the white uniforms of Simon’s house guard. Well, at least they had been white once upon a time, and were now varying shades of dirt, with liberal application of reddish-black blood.

The man in the lead was built like Brisbois, and had blood-matted gray hair. He shouted, “Put your hands up,” and I thought he meant us, but the people below, the people with him, protested, and he said again, “Put your hands up or they burn us from above, and I will not blame them. Drop weapons and put your hands up.”

There were the thuds of several burners dropped, disregarded, and then hands went up.

“You have us at your mercy, Brisbois,” he said. “I am most heartily sorry for this mess.”

“Unless, of course,” Simon said, “you have comrades in all those hallways, ready to erupt the moment we come down.”

The man that Brisbois said was Basil looked surprised as though the idea hadn’t occurred to him.

I’d been straining my senses again, trying to hear more than normal people could. “There are no people in those tunnels,” I said.

The decision of course was ultimately Brisbois’s, because this was a man he knew. How much confidence he had in him made all the difference. Brisbois still sounded a little winded. I guess what we’d been doing was a lot for someone older and heavier than Simon and I were.

He said, “He knows we’d still burn him if he pulled something funny.”

“Nothing funny,” Basil said. “I’m not laughing.”

“Well, in that,” Brisbois said, and looking backward I saw him attach his little rope ladder and drop it. “You have my full concurrence.”

And then there was a sound of running feet from one of the hallways.

“Not ours,” Basil shouted, and I reached for the burner.

When about twenty people erupted into the space below from one of the tunnels, I had a bead center mass on the lead man, and just barely stopped myself from shooting Jonathan LaForce.

“Don’t shoot,” I shouted, but it was probably superfluous, since both Brisbois and Simon knew him.

The newcomers were soaked, dripping water from what looked like the same sort of amphibian suit I was wearing. In Jonathan LaForce’s case it also dripped from his hair and beard. Between them his eyes blazed furiously. “What in hell,” he said. “Has been going on here?”

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Let There Be Light

TO SAY THE NEXT HALF HOUR WAS CONFUSED IS NOT UNAKIN TO SAYING THAT THE ocean is a little wet.

We did come down from our roost and, after a brief conference, Brisbois told Basil to pick up his burner and to let his people rearm themselves. After that, we separated into groups of two and three to go search the hallways and the rooms off them.

I cannot prove that Brisbois assigned Simon and myself the safest, most boring hallway in the entire compound. I don't even know how he could have found out that it was the safest hallway. After all, if he'd known that, then he'd know who was in every place and he wouldn't have needed to send patrols out, which they needed to do because the normal monitoring system had been tampered with and none of the sensors were working or couldn't be trusted.

If you get the impression that things aren't very clear in my memory, you are right. I was tired and coming down from a period of high stress, so words and sentences reached me, out of whole conversations, and I remembered only the impression of them.

Thus I retained the impression their surveillance system had broken, and so they sent us out, by twos and threes, and they sent me with Simon, who did the thing in style.

We walked down the hallway as silently as we could, listening at every door and kicking open the doors from the side, in the best virtus detective style, before peeking in, after which he searched the room, while I stayed in the hallway, in case someone charged out of another of the rooms, and then we traded, in case I could find something he had missed.

There must have been twenty bedrooms off that hallway, and I was starting to think that they were all unoccupied, until we got to the end,

where there had obviously been a fight, and two young men lay dead on the floor, in pools of blood, each with a burner still in his hand.

And then we returned to the common area, and were pulled into a room where things were being discussed, or explained. Or both. At first I wasn't very sure what was happening.

As I said, I was tired and confused.

The group consisted of myself and Simon and Basil, LaForce and Mailys, and some other people who'd come in with Jonathan LaForce and Mailys, but whom I didn't know. The strangers were very quiet. Mailys told me she'd left Corin with Jonathan LaForce's family, having convinced him to stay in order to keep them safe. She smiled when she said that, obviously very proud of having found the right way to talk Corin into not running any unnecessary risks.

I remember that, but nothing else said to me or around me left any impression.

However, little by little, after some young man in a relatively clean uniform had brought me three cups of coffee in quick succession, I stopped shivering and began feeling somewhat warmer and started paying attention to those around me.

Maybe it wasn't as much time as I thought. Brisbois and Simon both looked at me with concern, but they thought I couldn't see it, I think, so I pretended I didn't, for the sake of keeping the peace.

Basil looked tired, and he too was sipping coffee. He looked older than Brisbois, so he was a survivor from the regime of Simon's father. Which made me wonder if he was fully loyal. He frowned at me as if from a long distance, and unless I am completely wrong, at some point he asked me, "Jarl Ingemar?"

I don't know what the rest of the question was, because that part was either never heard or not rightly understood. I answered what I thought he was asking. "Has been dead," I said, "for over twenty years. He and Doctor Bartolomeu Dias created male and female clones of themselves. For—" I thought about the confused tangle of motives I knew about and the ones I could infer, and then remembered Doc Bartolomeu, who might be the closest thing I had had to a relative, or at least to a relative who cared for me. In the arid landscape of my childhood, he'd been a kindly if curmudgeonly presence, always ready with jokes or advice, with

encouragement and derision. He hadn't treated me like a child of the gods. I suppose, to him, I wasn't, just the closest thing to a daughter of an old friend.

So I thought of him and the less than charitable ideas I'd had about why Kit and I and possibly others—though Doc denied going through with creating his own male and female clones—had been created. And then I kept that part to myself and said, "For company, and I suppose for a new experience in their old age. Raising children. Only Jarl died before I was born."

"Oh," he said, and looked at me, a long evaluating look.

If I hadn't known that Athena Sinistra, like me the clone of a Mule, had been created so that her father's brain could be transplanted to her head, I'd have been offended. As it was, I merely shrugged it off and returned his scrutiny with an open stare.

He shook his head. "You understand finding your DNA…Well…We… Brisbois tells me you were born and raised in a colony not populated by Mules. He says you can't reveal its placement, or your origin, and I'm certainly not going to force the issue. I don't have an interest in it. Even if you came from the world of darkship thieves. I know that Good Man Sinistra had an entire project of catching the darkship thieves, but there is no real damage from them. More power pods are created than can be harvested in time. It's possible the thieves are doing us a favor, by diminishing the chances that the pods will explode and reseed, making the power trees even harder to harvest. So, if your planet of origin is some harmless colony of the normal people who left with the Mules and were abandoned behind, we don't mind.

"On the other hand, it is hard not to imagine that the Mules who named their ship *Je Reviens* had something planned."

"Whatever they had planned," this was Simon, crisply. He disliked the term "Mule" as intensely as the original Mules had. He referred to them as they'd referred to themselves, as *biorulers* or *biolords.* "Their plans went wrong almost from the beginning, since they did not plan on leaving half of their number behind. So, I think we can stop wondering what they meant. And Jarl is dead. He won't be coming back."

I felt a twinge of discomfort, since Jarl had more or less tried to come back from the grave by taking over Kit, and Simon knew it too, but neither

of us spoke of that.

Basil sighed. “Well, that’s it. And we know who you are and what you are, of course, Monsieur St. Cyr.”

Simon smiled, his lips quirking upwards on the right. It wasn’t a nice smile. “I know who I am, also,” he said.

Brisbois made a sound that might have been *“merde”* under his breath.

“What I want to know,” Jonathan LaForce said. “Has very little to do with who St. Cyr or Madame Sienna is and everything to do with how in holy hell you got into this mess here.” He looked at Basil, his eyes conveying barely restrained fury. “This was a safe place. Known only by me. There are others of these places even I don’t know of. Brisbois—” He looked at Alexis. “Set these up because he thought the carefully planned transition in the revolution might go wrong. They were supposed to be safe!” LaForce’s fist was huge, and it banged on the table hard. “We were supposed to be safe here and able to work a counterattack. So, we come back to this?”

Basil held the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger for a count of two minutes, his eyes closed, his head slightly inclined. When he looked back up, he looked…bereft. Like a man who had a plan and had done his best to make it work, only to find that he was on the wrong track the whole time. “I still had to staff these shelters with people. Our people.”

I looked up, suddenly, as things added up behind my eyes. “You mean that everyone here was modified? And how many more people were modified? You said there were other shelters.”

Basil looked up. He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut, then sighed. “Tens of thousands, at least. That we know and can trace, and can be traced, in my lifetime, maybe a little older, twenty thousand or so. We have…four thousand in various hidden shelters, here and in the continental territories, mostly in Europe.” He took a deep breath, and looked at what must have been my utterly shocked face. “Not all first generation. Not even close. Some are the result of mating between enhanced people whose enhancements breed true.”

I felt like this was insane. Was everyone modified? Then at the last minute I remembered the difference between Earth and Eden. In Eden having twenty thousand intentionally enhanced people might represent all of the population. In fact, it almost did, though a lot of people didn’t tamper

with their children's fundamental makeup out of religious respect or other considerations. But bioengineering was widely available and got widely employed. Expensive modifications like the ones that created navigators and pilots and a few other highly specialized communities were rare and kept within a certain number of families, normally. But minor modifications, for looks or computational ability, often got bought on a retail basis by prospective parents worried about how their children would turn out. The thing was—

I paused. The thing was that in Eden, where modifications were out in the open and openly bought, the modifications were not inheritable. They couldn't be because, if they were, then the companies would shortly not have anything to sell. And it turned out the majority of people were prejudiced towards their kids being maybe only a little better than themselves.

But on Earth, where modifications were underground, secretive, and run by an over-authoritarian elite, then of course the modifications would be inheritable, and often imposed from above, so that everyone who could be born with enhancements represented a cheap buy for the Good Men. No. That couldn't be true. Given that sort of setup, how could the Good Men be sure they controlled everyone who was modified for their benefit, or at least that they controlled them so they didn't turn against the Good Men?

Then I remembered that the Good Men had a slight quirk absent from the makeup of both Eden and most of the human population on Earth. Because of who they were—the original high IQ Mules, raised to be servants of the bureaucracy but taking power over the bureaucracy itself and blossoming into the biolords—and the way they were brought up, in strict crèches, by people who were afraid of them, they had virtually no loyalty to humanity in general, and very little loyalty to enhanced people.

It wasn't so much that they didn't consider themselves human or thought of humans as objects. They thought of everyone, themselves included, as objects. Humans were just things you played with. Numbers, ciphers. They didn't even think of themselves as relevant or important. Their upbringing had stripped them of that.

Normal people, no matter what the logical necessity of the move, wouldn't be able to have clones of themselves made and raise them as their own children, no matter how detached the raising, and then have them killed in order to steal their bodies. Normal human beings, no matter how

maimed or wounded—human beings who thought of themselves as human beings or even as significant in any way beyond a purpose—wouldn't be able to do that to a child they'd seen grow up.

I realized, with a sort of inner shake, that I would not be able to do it. Even if I had hated the young person I'd raised, I would not be able to kill him or her in order to keep myself alive and in power.

But the only thing the Good Men had, the only thing that they lived by and held to, the only thing they wanted, was to preserve their own lives. There was no higher principle. Any they'd been given had failed to take hold. If they'd been given any principles beyond "obey constituted authority"—and I don't think there had been much—they'd learned better, when they'd realized how thoroughly they'd been manipulated and designed as a sort of superior slave, despite being more capable than those around them.

The poor creatures had been thrown into the world as a sort of maimed solipsistic paranoids. They not only didn't consider anyone else real, they didn't consider themselves particularly real or special either. They had only wanted to survive.

A bit of that feeling had resulted in my creation and Kit's, by two who were arguably the best of the Mules. And even if they had repented the impulse that might have led to our destruction ultimately, the impulse had been there.

The Mules, having become the Good Men, could afford to have vast populations enhanced and not fear them, because the Mules, ultimately, didn't care how many of their own creations they killed. Hundreds? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? The ones who rebelled or who didn't fully participate could be eliminated and the others would be kept on, with the threat of their bioimproving being revealed, of their not being safe, ever, except under the Good Men.

"How many people are there in Liberte?" I asked.

"Counting the territories?"

I nodded.

"Counting the territories in Europe and the Americas…Oh, thirty million or so," he said. "Why?"

"Because," I said. "We—and by that I mean enhanced people—are still a tiny minority. How could the people who tried to subvert this shelter and

possibly the others attempt to rule everyone?”

Basil shrugged. “I don’t believe they were thinking so much. They were swayed. Told tales. You know, come to our side and we will give you power over the multitudes. You won’t have to hide—”

Simon said something under his breath. I thought it was “And the Devil took him to a high mountain.” Simon’s references and sources of inspiration were often thoroughly baffling. He drummed his fingers on the table. “More important than calculating how they could have come to believe this is to find out how many other people believed it.” he said, suddenly, and with these words he seemed to draw onto himself the mantel of authority, stopping being what he was—in fact, an unremarkable average-height man with average colored hair and eyes and skin—and seeming to command the attention of everyone in his presence. “And the most important thing to know is many of those people are in our supposed safe places; how many of these people are people we were counting on and, most all of, Basil, what I’d really like to know is how one tells the sheep from the goats.”

Basil somehow changed, as Simon changed, going from being the confident leader of this base, to being a subordinate, and one who was none too sure of his ground. I couldn’t imagine why, except there was something about Simon’s easy assumption of authority that carried its own conviction with it.

“That’s all very easy to say,” he said. “But the truth is if they were careful enough to have nothing in writing, or to have hidden the writings they did have, we’ll never find out.”

Simon looked thunderous. “Which leaves us in the unenviable position of trying to move while we don’t know which of our forces we can trust.”

“Move?” Basil said. “You mean…counterattack? We don’t have nearly enough people for that. We thought…”

“You thought Brisbois was just creating a place for me to hide? Several places?”

Basil shrugged. “I thought—undercover work? Slow?”

“To be fair,” Brisbois said. “That is what we thought too. That if the Sans Culottes should escape your control it would take us years to regain the city proper, let alone the territories.”

Simon touched the bridge of his nose with his index finger. I got the feeling he was trying to collect his thoughts, as his inner voice rebelled against that idea of slow and careful infiltration. I wondered if that was how the man he had been cloned from had done it. Surely that would fit his personality type, engineered and educated into him by those who had created him: to be a spy, a chameleon, to manipulate from the outside, slowly moving inside, without ever revealing himself. But Simon didn't have the same education. Simon was not the original of his genes.

"We thought," Brisbois said, "that you could use the shelters to hide in, use the people in them as your infiltrators, slowly work to create a freer government, one which wouldn't kill people at least. We thought—"

"Alexis, for the love of Liberte, stop saying *we* as though that meant something. Unless you've acquired multiple personality disorder call it what it is: you thought and you decided. The fact that you were right about the likelihood the Sans Culottes would be corrupted and taken over by your ex-wife does not make me feel better about your initiative. And I'm not sure you shouldn't have thought about another plan."

Alexis opened his hands. I thought that living under an autocratic master who had the power of life and death over you, for any reason or none at all, the man should have developed…fear. That he hadn't, that he was answering Simon's rebuke as a rebuke not a threat said a lot about him. And a lot about Simon, I thought, whose character was the sole guarantor of Alexis life in these circumstances. "I said 'we,'" he said ponderously. "And I meant 'we.'" He looked up, a look of stern determination on his plain face. "Look, Simon, this is what your father—what the old Good Man did when he felt the crash coming, when he suspected that there might not be a berth in the *Je Reviens* for him. This is how he planned to survive, and how he ultimately survived."

I thought, *So I was right,* at the same time that Simon looked up startled. "And he managed it, damn him," Simon said. "To become a prisoner of his role and far too interested in power to ever let go. But, Alexis, I don't intend to artificially extend my life."

"It's not prolongation," Alexis said, "You're enhanced for exceptionally long life. All the Mules were. But the Good Men don't need longevity, see, so much as pretending they're like everyone else. If I understood Fa—Doctor Dufort properly, your kind, and maybe ours, though I never asked, could easily expect to live two or three hundred years. To

pretend your son inherited would only be needed if you were hiding your essential nature as…ah…created, not born."

Simon opened his mouth and I thought he was going to dispute the not-born thing. After all, he'd been born, even if by a surrogate. But suddenly there was a look as though the weight of the world had fallen on his shoulders. "Damn you, Alexis. I don't want to imitate my soi-disant father. If I thought that's what awaited me, I'd blow my brains clean out, before you could force me into that position. I want to—"

"Pan for gold in the territories," Brisbois said, and there was a hint of teasing to his voice, much like an older sibling amused at the younger sibling's childish dreams. I thought they'd quite forgotten Basil, and Mailys, and even Jonathan LaForce, who was following all of this in grim silence, his mouth tightly compressed, his dark eyebrows low over his eyes.

He made an explosive sound at Brisbois's rejoinder, but didn't say anything, and his noise—likely involuntary—got no more than a puzzled frown from Basil.

"No," Simon said. "Not that. I mean, not my ambitions, but what I want for Liberte, what must be done. I want to stop the killings. I want to make sure there is a semi-sane regime in place. I'm not an idealist, and I'm not religious, like the Usaians, which is why I never joined, despite Abigail Remy's proselytizing. I'm a realist and I've read enough history to understand that there is no perfect regime, not here, not ever. There are accommodations people make to survive for the next century, the next decade, or the next week.

"I know my history well. I know a well-run dictatorship can be better than a badly run democracy. We have examples aplenty of it. Multiplying the judgement of morons doesn't suddenly make them geniuses, and most people are at best average, and even geniuses can be morons when it comes to governing others.

"I joined the Sans Culottes because they had started up already and they had a romantic vision of the government of old France. That's fine. The Usaians have a mystical vision of the government of the old North America, even though from sources of the time, the regime worked most often in the breach. It made sense—just like the Usaians believe in the substance of their form of government and ignore the faults in it—the new Sans Culottes preferred to believe that the problems with the revolution, the massacres, the fights, were incidental and not endemic to the system.

“I had a slightly different idea. I wanted to believe, but I couldn’t quite. When you try to make everyone equal in results, it’s going to end in blood. It always has. But the thing is, I thought it *might* work. I thought it had a chance. The regime of my late, unlamented progenitor had leveled a lot of the differences between people, when it came right down to the essentials. Yes, some people were richer than others, but all lived about the same lifestyle, except for my esteemed Père. Only it didn’t stay that way. The Usaians—damn them—and their propaganda coup revealed that the Good Men are the same as the Mules, the same as the biolords back to the twenty-first century. Not the same in questionable ethics and power grabbing, but the same in everything but name. And that let all the demons of Hell loose upon my kind. And the demons of my kind, too, those who think we should rule humanity. Alexis, I don’t know what you meant, but the last thing I want to do is to repeat the whole miserable cycle.”

“Well, there,” Alexis said, and opened his hands on the table. His hands looked incongruous on the polished table, too large, too calloused, too blunt-fingered. “I didn’t intend for you to become like…like the previous ruler. I didn’t intend for you to be a ruler at all. Your peculiar talents of subversion can be used in the task of creating a better government, as well as a more or less autocratic one. That’s all I meant for you to do.”

Jonathan LaForce’s eyebrows seemed to lower still more, till all that was visible of his eyes was a vague glint beneath them. But he didn’t say anything and I thought neither Alexis nor Simon were aware of him. Nor of the rest of us.

I cleared my throat and both turned to look at me.

“The thing is,” I said. “You don’t have time for that. Whatever you thought Simon was going to do, Brisbois, and whatever Simon would like or would not like to do is all for naught. Jonathan says, and I believe him, that forces are massing to come and crush Liberte. Or more specifically, to crush the revolution and to install a Good Man in Simon’s place, since he’s presumed dead.

“The forces of the Good Men could not have hoped to invade and defeat Liberte when it was functioning, as you told me the night of the ball.” Was that only a few days ago? It seemed like a lifetime. “They were occupied with their war on the Usaians, too busy to commit to a war with us also. But now it’s not a war. This seacity is a smoldering ruin, and

Madame's forces aren't able to control day-to-day crime. In another two days, the invaders will probably be greeted as liberators. In a week, they surely will, and, correct me if I'm wrong, the usual method of taking over a seacity is to have the Good Man invading kill everyone capable of resisting, right? And then everything goes on as usual."

"So?" Simon said. "What do you suggest we should do about it?" It struck me that he was unusually serious, then I realized it wasn't seriousness, so much, as the fact that maybe for the first time he was talking to me as he talked to Alexis. There wasn't even the slightest appreciative glint in his eyes.

I found the rest of the room looking at me. It wasn't a new experience. In the past, at home, I'd often felt responsible for coming up with an action plan, and people tended to respond by expecting me to say or do something. The difference was that now I really didn't have any idea what to do.

The first thoughts that came to mind was that this was not my world and not my problem. But I'd involved myself in its destinies, put myself in peril and put them in peril too, to try to save Simon. Which meant in a way it was my responsibility. Because I'd taken it.

More than that, I intended to stay on this world. It had been a necessary decision to avoid my own troubles back home. But the decision had troubles of its own. It had given me a chance to escape attempts to marry me off to someone whose only qualification was being genetically engineered for a job complementary to the one I'd been created and taught to do. On the other hand, I couldn't say I'd much appreciate living under the regime of the Good Men. In fact, I wouldn't appreciate it at all.

And if the Good Men swallowed Liberte, a very likely circumstance at this point in time, they were just as likely to tamp down the Usaians and the remaining foci of rebellion. Each seacity, each parcel of territories returned to the *ancien regime* would mean that much more chance of the old ways winning. At any rate, there is an inertia in the affairs of humans, that tends to pull people towards what's familiar, well known, and therefore seen as safe.

I started talking, more for the sake of outlining things as I saw them than to say anything of substance. But everyone expected me to say something productive, or at least Simon was looking at me expectantly, so I said, "If the Good Men take over Liberte, and they could do it walking at

this point, it will be that much easier to stop all the other rebellions. And then their regime will return."

I saw Brisbois's face compose itself into something like shock. I didn't know if he was reacting to my saying it aloud or to my saying it at all; whether he thought it was shocking I would dare to voice it, or if he'd never thought of it before. I responded with something that answered both instances. "Well," I said. "They have managed to hold power for three hundred years. Longer, if you count the time before the Turmoils. They were designed for it, you might say. Why do you think they won't return to it? Surely there have been rebellions before. I didn't study your history, but I've overheard…"

Simon made a noise. "Isolated," he said. "Small. Not—" His voice seemed to strangle upon itself, as though the import of what he was saying had just hit him. "I take your meaning. If they isolate us, they will tamp down this one too."

"They have isolated you," I said. "To an extent. All right, maybe it wasn't the Good Men alone, but the rebellion within the seacity made it dangerous for other rebels like the Usaians to help you, and that in turn made it more likely that they would win each battle separately."

It seemed to me Simon had grown paler and, considering his general pallor from lack of sleep, it was saying something. It made him look sickly. He said something under his breath. I thought it was *"Merde."* Then took a deep breath. "So, our top priority," he said, "is to put down the rebellion."

I felt like I was kicking a puppy, but the truth must be told. "Oh, no," I said. "That was your priority…a couple of days ago. You didn't."

"I couldn't," he said. "I was—"

I saw Brisbois open his mouth to answer, and his eyebrows were low over his eyes, so much so that he looked to be imitating Jonathan LaForce. I expected at any moment that a reference to panning for gold would come flying out of his mouth. Instead, Mailys said, "The reason doesn't matter. Madame Sienna is right. We didn't do it then, and we should have. Now what can we do?"

"We must still put down the rebellion," Simon said. "Because we can't afford to have fighting in back and in front of us. We have to know one of the sides is defensible."

“Yes,” Mailys said. “*Alors*, we must fight all of them at once. We must put down the rebels, and we must get help from the seacities. We must prevent the invasion.”

Simon took in a deep breath. This time what he let out was “*Merde,*” but he followed it with, “You know you could set me only one impossible task at a time? It would be easier.”

Brisbois made a sound that might have been laughter, but he shook his head. “No one is setting you anything, Patrician. I believe we were talking about what *we* could do, not you, yourself.”

Simon looked startled as if it had never occurred to him he might not be master of and responsible for every possible situation. I sympathized. I knew the feeling. In fact, the feeling was still upon me. “Yes, but we must find a way to discover who the infiltrators are in your organization first.” And as Simon looked at me, I said, “Look, the task is fairly impossible, whether with one person or ten thousand, and Brisbois might have picked people more capable of secret work and infiltration than direct fighting, but by all that’s holy, surely you realize that the impossible tasks will be slightly less impossible with the people he did hide against the eventuality? No matter how bad at fighting, a few thousand are better than six. And at any rate, a few thousand trained and competent at spying and gathering information can help us at least with part of our problem: that of finding the infiltrators in our ranks.”

“No,” Simon protested. “They won’t and can’t, when we can’t tell which in our ranks are infiltrators. It’s circular, Zen.”

The flirt was back in his voice. No, it wasn’t open, but suddenly I had the feeling that he was once more regarding me as someone decorative and fairly useless. Decorative I might be, by design, but useless I’d not been brought up to be. I said, short, and without much aim, just wanting to deflect the appreciative look in his eyes and that slight joking tone in his voice, “We could try the ‘fly, all is discovered’ trick.”

“The what?” this was Jonathan LaForce and he didn’t sound flirtatious, merely as though I were out of my ever-loving mind.

I sighed. Okay, I’d have to come up with something now. “I meant we could send some sort of message that would force them to reveal themselves.”

Basil had been mute and fixated on the conversation this long, now he looked up. “What if they don’t know, themselves?”

“Don’t know they’re rebelling?” I asked finding this unlikely.

He looked impatient. “No, I meant they don’t know who the other parties to the rebellion are. It’s not unlikely, you know? With nothing written and no scheme of the organization, the only way they could have done it—The only way they could have recruited and kept it secret this long, for that matter, is to do it in cells.” And to my utterly blank look, he continued, “Like the communist organizations in ancient days. Very efficient. Some parts of them continued to operate and arguably took down what called itself Western civilization after the main source of the ideology had collapsed.

“They organized in cells of three, where one of them knew only the other two, and one of them knew someone above and someone below. It worked, because it was both isolated and resilient. Take out one cell and that’s all you’ve taken out. Torture can’t make a man reveal what he doesn’t know.” He paused, chewing the corner of his lip. “You know, that explains something that puzzled me about it, too. They did not come at us all at once, as if a call had gone out to everyone, but by ones and twos, as though the call had been filtered down, one by one.”

“So?” Simon said. “How does that serve us? Unless we know who each of the people were supposed to contact, we can’t send a false message through their network and force them to reveal themselves. So we’re back at the beginning.”

“No,” I said. “No. Look, do you have a list of those who died?”

“Of course,” Basil said. He looked at me like I was a complete idiot.

“No, I have a point,” I said. “They lived here how long?”

“Three years,” he said.

“Without leaving?”

He made a face. “You couldn’t keep people closed up here for three years,” he said. “Not with the seacity right above us. They’d have left unauthorized, if not given permission. They had leave and routes they had to vary to get in and out.”

“This is all pointless,” Simon said. “If some of them were corrupted by Madame, Madame Parr knows where we are. Well, where the hiding places are.” The others looked as startled as I felt. I hadn’t thought of it. Simon

laughed in the face of our surprise. “Please. The only reason she hasn’t sent anyone in is that it’s unlikely news that every one of her minions here has died has reached her.”

Before he had finished talking, Basil had slapped a part of the table that turned on a com. I couldn’t see it, but a hologram formed in the middle of the table, turned towards him. From where I was, it looked like nothing but a pattern of lights and shadows, moving. He barked orders into it, too rapidly and too coded for me to understand. Close this, lock that, watch that.

Then he slapped the holo off. “So what you’re saying is that we have no time. We can secure this one place, but as soon as they try to break in here and find it locked, they’ll know they’ve been revealed, and the other centers will be opened for them, betrayed, if you will, by the inside traitors, so that our own people will be massacred with no appeal.”

“It would seem so,” Simon said.

“No, damn it,” I said. And the swearing surprised me, both because it wasn’t something I was in the habit of doing and because it came out in the local patois. I understood it as it hit my ears though. It sounded very rude, which was, of course, satisfying.

“No?” Simon said. “What other choice do we have?”

“The choice to move quickly and snare the traitors,” I said.

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Why Call Them Back from Heaven?

THEY WERE ALL STARING AT ME, AS THOUGH I'D GROWN A SECOND HEAD. I struggled to express an idea that wasn't yet even a full idea, just a sort of inchoate feeling. "Get a list of those dead," I told Basil. "I assume that even though they weren't kept prisoners here, people went through a central control for messages to the outside."

"Of course," Basil said. He was back to looking very tired and sighed. "I know we must seem like fools to you, but we're not actually completely stupid. We knew some control of what they were allowed to say and to whom was necessary. Or at least of whom they contacted. They could call other people in the other centers, not in the seacity itself. We knew they could reveal us when they went on leave, but that was likely to be less of a temptation face to face than in the middle of long, daily contacts with friends and sweethearts. They might reveal us to people in other centers, but that was less of a threat. After all, they too were at least semi-isolated from the seacity."

"So you know who they called in the other centers?"

He looked startled. And then he was slapping the table again, and the hologram appeared. "Etienne," He said. "Do you know who"—he rattled off half a dozen names—"called in the other centers?"

The answers came back and he wrote them down. He slapped on the table. "Madame Sienna," he said, "I don't know what we can make of it, because it's possible the person they called most is not the important one, but then two of them called only one person, in each of the other centers."

"Good," Simon said. "We'll take those two."

"Very well," Basil said. "Take them and do what?"

"Pass a message down through their network," he gave a slight smile. "Fly, all is discovered, perhaps."

"No," I said.

“No?” Simon asked.

“No.” My mind was working below conscious level again, and I had to fill in the reasons I’d said that instinctive “no.” “‘Fly, all is discovered’ will just lead them to call Madame. We have only a short space of time before they do anyway, out of panic. And we can’t be ready for their attack because we don’t know where and when. The goal is to bring them to us in a place and time of our choosing. We must say something else.”

Simon pulled at his lip. “Yes, I see your point. Perhaps more ‘we are victorious, reveal yourselves and take control’?”

“That’s all very well,” Basil said. “But it won’t help.”

“No?”

“No. If we do that, then they’ll attack. The people they’ll attack will have no idea what they’re doing,” he said. “If I could warn the others… These people are, maybe, five percent of the total, and if we could warn the ones in charge at the centers, we’d have a good chance of defeating them. But if they attack their comrades without warning…”

“Well, what then?” Simon said. “If we tell them to come to our aid they’re likely to call Madame, and that we already have a danger of.”

“No,” I said.

“No?”

“No. Look, in this type of organization, they all eat each other. What I mean is, I got the impression that, like in the original revolution, even the minions of Madame are none too safe. Step wrong and it could be them losing their heads.”

“Yes, but these people are in our own hidden centers. They’re not—”

“Listen to me,” I said. “Are those people who only contacted one person out of the center likely to be high rank, Basil?”

Basil nodded. “If by that you mean they were well-trained specialists, key people I counted on, yes.” He made a face. “Damn them. How could they have let themselves be corrupted by a gospel of the inherent superiority of improved people?”

“Easily enough,” Brisbois said. His voice sounded both heavy and resentful. “How not? It’s in the wording, itself: improved. We’re better, right? And being better, how can we avoid taking over? Trust me, I heard that gospel myself, a little modified, and when you’re young and stupid—

and everyone who is young is stupid in a very specialized way—it's an easy message to convince people of."

Basil sighed. "But yes. They're people I'd never have expected to be reachable by conspiracy. Which is what scares me."

"It shouldn't scare you," I said. "This is the message to send out: We have the Good Man. He's not dead—" Simon made a sound of extreme surprise. I gestured him away. "He's not dead and we have him cornered with his closest associates. But we are involved in heavy fighting. Basil is dead"—another sound of surprise, which I ignored—"but some of the loyal members of this force are still fighting. We're near winning but need assistance. If you send only enough people to overcome resistance, we can overpower them, capture the Good Man, Alexis Brisbois, the Good Man's companion, Jonathan LaForce and Mailys Bonheur. Together we can take them to Madame and claim the glory and honor of having captured her greatest enemy."

"Yeah, me," Brisbois said, bitterly. I chose to ignore him.

"Explain to me," Basil said. "Why this is not like a message to come help us, because we are discovered. Why wouldn't they call Madame?"

"Because capturing the Good Man is something the revolutionaries, all of them, most particularly Madame, would be grateful for. They'll want to be part of it."

"But they'll let out word that the Good Man is alive."

"Not hardly," Simon said. He cast me a speculative look out of the corner of his eye, and then his lips trembled in something like amusement that he pulled back from. It was as though he weren't absolutely sure how to view me: as a beautiful woman or a dangerous associate. "They won't talk. I think Zen has it. What the rest of you fail to see is the inherently paranoid nature of this movement."

"No," Alexis said. "I see it. I simply fail to see how this can benefit us."

"They'll want a portion of the glory," Simon said. "We know that and we know the conspiracy was paranoid and selfish, because if it weren't we'd already be hip deep in Madame Parr's agents. That we aren't can mean only one thing, and that is they wanted the glory all to themselves, instead of giving the alarm about the invasion. That says all you need to know about the nature of this movement. Even seeing their comrades die,

even besieged, they chose to continue fighting alone rather than to call a source of troops, because fighting alone allowed them to have the glory of capturing me. Or perhaps they were afraid of having made the wrong choice, and can't tell how their movement leaders would react. Judging by those show executions, the movement is more than a little unpredictable, and addicted to blood."

"They were all very young," Basil said. "Or most of them."

"Which explains but doesn't excuse it," Simon said. "Still, that being the nature of the movement, they'll come hot foot to capture me. And then we can try babble juice, or other means to figure out the rest of the moles who don't come. Do you think there are chances they're protected with dead man switches, which will kill them if they talk?"

Alexis pushed his lips out, in a considering expression. His eyebrows were low over his eyes again. "I don't think so," he said. "Look, they're not that high-level. Not enough for them to spend the effort, much less the time and expense, of protecting each and every one of them. But that is not the problem, Simon."

"What is it then?"

"We don't have the dead men. They can't believe, in any way that the dead men are talking to them. And if it's a cell system, anyone else talking to them about secret stuff will set off alarms. They'll know security was breached. They'll know something was wrong. They won't come."

"Ah…" Simon smiled. "Ah. Indeed. And yet, Alexis, you know what my original was created for."

"As a spy? You still would need time to infiltrate and establish an identity, and—"

Simon waved him away. "Basil, do you have recordings of these people? Can I see them?"

Moments later, Simon was staring intently at recordings of two young men. The circumstances were much what we could expect of the sort of recordings this sort of installation would make, of course: reports on their guard watch—mostly nothing to report.

The longest reports were the ones where they described what they had done on their leave in the seacity. Mostly telling us where they'd eaten and what they'd done and such. I wondered how much of it was a fiction, but there were heartbreaking glimpses of personality and animation. They'd

smile or nod when saying something. And I realized that yes, they were very young. And enhanced. And likely feeling put upon by the Good Man and the world in general. They would be tempted. of course.

Simon played these tapes more than the others. I wondered why. There were no clues to what to tell their contacts in them.

“I think I got it, Basil,” he said, at last. “Do you have uniforms like the ones the dead men were wearing?”

“You can’t hope to pass as them,” Basil said. “They had quite different features. They will—”

“I have no intention of letting them see my features.”

“I don’t see how you can avoid it, sir,” he said. “They will be suspicious if you make two calls and, in both of them, tell them the video is out.”

“Yes,” Simon said. “They’d be if I were stupid enough to do something so dumb. I’m not, thank you.”

“But then—” Basil said.

“Give the man what he asked for, Basil,” Brisbois said, very quietly. I noticed the people who, presumably, knew Simon best, Mailys, Brisbois, LaForce, were not saying anything, hadn’t made any protest. I started to wonder if Simon was some sort of shape shifter.

Turned out, no. What he was was a superb actor and master of stage setting, lighting, movement.

He went away with the reluctant Basil and came back moments later, wearing a uniform similar to what the people in here wore. He moved… differently and somehow managed to look taller. No, I have no idea how. He couldn’t change his features, but his features—once he had played with lighting, the arrangement of furniture and what I’ll call stage setting—were not in the light at any time, or seen fully on. And his features such as they were had that kind of generic quality that a glimpse from the side, a view of the ear or the chin could be a thousand different people.

What was convincing, though, was the way he moved. He was already in character as he came in and started to disarray the furniture, overturning chairs, skewing a picture on the wall, aiming his burner and making a burn mark on the door, just above his head. Basil took in breath at that, but then it must have occurred to him that if the door belonged to anyone it was Simon and that he couldn’t scold a man for destroying his own property.

I got the impression that Simon was enjoying all this more than was reasonable. That perhaps he'd long wanted to destroy his own property.

Then as he did a test run at pretending to be someone else, I realized that despite the different features he managed to give the impression of being the first young man we'd seen on the tapes, and that this young man was making a sort of desperate try on, an attempt both brave and insane.

He backtracked and started playing with light controls by the door. This time Basil did make a sound, as the lights flickered wildly overhead. "Patrician," he said, and then he joined Simon, and conferred with him in a low voice. To Simon's animated instructions, he flickered lights, not so much turning lighting off as making it less revelatory. It shone where it shouldn't and cast other places in shadow, all the while without looking unnaturally dark or suspiciously low.

The first man, Etienne, had been slight with a sort of tripping trick of speech, where each word tried to come out before the other one was done.

Simon captured that way of speech, the pitch of the voice, the way the man tilted his head while speaking. When the man on the other side materialized as a holo in the room—we were behind it, and he couldn't see us, nor could we see him but as a shadow cast on Simon's features—Simon delivered the message he'd thought up.

The response on the other side was guarded. "Etienne? Is all well?"

Simon broke the supposed secrecy almost immediately, reacting in an excited way, or rather like a man trying to suppress excitement. My admiration of his acting ability grew, as he poured out, in the exact mannerisms of the dead man and in a tone that was pitch perfect for excitement and triumph, the story of the Good Man coming in with his close friends, of his being captured, of the need for reinforcement, of the glory they could win in the eyes of Madame.

Halfway through it, as I sat mouth half open in wonder at Simon's act, my mind wondered how it appeared from the other end. It wasn't so much a question of how it would work, but a question of whether the actions in response would be anything like Simon and I had anticipated. I wondered if we had moles on that side, the same way they had moles on our side. And then I wondered if not, why not? Could we capture their communications? I shifted in my seat, thinking how Jonathan LaForce had some indication that

the Good Men were about to attack, but how? Did we at least have informers there?

Brisbois's hand came down on my shoulder, large and warm. Not a grip, so much as a touch, conveying concern.

I turned back to find that Brisbois, standing behind and to the side of my chair was watching me with a curious expression. It was as though he were looking into my mind, figuring out what I was thinking. He looked in equal measure concerned and questioning.

I opened my mouth, but he put his finger over his lips, and made a head gesture towards Simon, who was now imitating the second young man, as voluble and pitch perfect a performance as any. Then he gestured, with his head, in the other direction, behind the back of the hologram that Simon was talking to. The way we wouldn't be seen. The way out of the room.

I nodded, and got up, and followed him as soundlessly as possible out of the room.

Out in the hallway, having closed the door, Brisbois said, "If you permit me, Madame Sienna, we'll find a place to talk." We walked down a hallway and he asked a passing young woman, blond and smart in the uniform of Simon's forces, a question that ended in "secure room."

She led us down a side corridor into what looked like a meeting room, the twin of the one in which we'd sat before.

I'll say this for Brisbois. He would not win any contests as the most trusting man alive. After the young woman left, he looked around the room and closely examined various fixtures. I didn't say anything as he beat with unreasonable force what appeared to be a mere smoke detector high on the wall.

But my expression must have shown curiosity or amusement, because he smiled as he turned to look at me. "It probably was just a fire alarm," he said. "But it's a matter of life or death."

"What is?" I asked, confused, as he made sure the door was closed and locked. Strangely, it occurred to me I wasn't afraid of being closed in with him. It made no sense, since I now knew he was quite capable of taking me out as no other man I'd ever been around could.

On the other hand, I had been alone with him in the motel. Technically twice, since Simon had been knocked out the second time.

“I saw that you were worrying,” he said. “When I looked at you in the room. When Simon was doing his thing. Now, it’s entirely possible that your worry is minor and needless. It’s also possible that thing on the wall really was an innocuous fire alarm. On the other hand, I don’t think so in either case. And if your worry is relevant and important, in the situation we’re in, it’s quite possible that our not being overheard is a matter of life and death.” He pulled himself up by his hands to sit on the small round conference table, which creaked under his weight, and grinned at me, the grin that transformed his more than homeless features. “So, suppose you tell me what was going through your head back there?”

“Oh,” I said. And tried to pull a straight thread from the confusion of my thoughts. “I thought that we don’t know anything.” He raised an eyebrow and I went on, “So the centers were penetrated. I get that. There are moles. And Simon is dealing with that. Supposing he finds them all and clears them, this leaves us with two problems.”

“Only two?” It was an amused rumble.

I ignored it because the man had the oddest sense of humor. “Roughly,” I said. “Two centers of problems, at least. There’s the Good Men and there’s Madame.” I ticked them on my fingers, then looked at him, and he nodded. “The question is in what order we handle them.”

“Oh, we’re going to handle them?” he asked.

“We have to,” I said. “That’s the whole point, isn’t it? If we don’t handle Madame, then the Good Men take us.”

“Or the Good Men take us, in any case?”

“It’s not a very hopeful view, is it? I thought we were going to try to get people to rally behind Simon? That it was the whole point of dragging him into this?”

Brisbois gave the impression of counting back from a million. Or at least it seemed to me to take that long, looking at his rolled up eyes, his pursed lips, his whole expression that of someone absorbed in a calculation he can’t share with mere mortals. “Ah,” he said. “There is a difference between trying and succeeding.”

“You don’t think we’ll succeed?” I asked.

“I think we’re going to get creamed,” he said. “But I also don’t believe in giving up without a fight. The thing is, I think in the end it is going to come to this: holing up in the secret bases and plotting a takeover, the way

the old bast—the old Good Man did. I don't think Simon is magical, nor do I think that he can pull a solution out of thin air that didn't work before."

I sat down. I sat at his side and splayed my hands on the table. Arguably I'd given up too soon when Len had been sick with radiation poisoning and I'd been the only person who could have saved him. I could have saved him by doing something unconventional, something that wasn't in the instructions for what we should do. I could have commed Earth, or at least Circum Terra. We'd heard, by then, all of us, that Earth was trying to find Kit's wife, Athena Sinistra. I could have offered to give them hints of her location. I could have strung them out long enough for Len to get treatment. I just hadn't realized it at the time. I'd been dumb with his suffering, sick with loneliness and helplessness.

I hadn't thought of saving him, I realized, as my heart turned within me, and it felt like my gut filled with ice. I had thought of stopping the suffering. And not even his suffering, no, but my suffering at having to watch him suffer.

I was a coward and a fraud, and my cowardice had cost my husband his life.

I looked up at Alexis Brisbois, that big, uncomely face, the lowered brows. And then I read the pain and fear in the eyes. And I knew. I knew that like me back then, he was scared, and he just wanted the pain to stop. It wasn't a tangle of emotions likely to produce the best results.

I looked him in the eye and I said, "Damn it, no. You are trying to give up without giving up. You're trying to do it in the fastest possible way, to stop the suffering. Yours, the seacity's, and Simon's too. Of course staying here, quietly, and working at slow subversion would be more comfortable. Almost going back in time, wouldn't it, Monsieur Brisbois? Reliving your youth?"

There was a moment. His hand rose and I moved back a little, but his surprised glance told me he had never meant to strike me. Instead, he clenched his fist. Then unclenched. "And what was your bright idea?" he asked. "And why do you think I'm giving up too soon, instead of trying to accept the inevitable."

"It's not inevitable and you know it. You're a competent and intelligent man, and yet you willingly…You have sabotaged your own side by not gathering the required intelligence."

“What?”

“You said Jonathan LaForce told you the Good Men were plotting to attack. He’d told me the same. But you have, to my knowledge, made no effort to find out when. And don’t tell me it doesn’t matter,” I said, as I saw his shoulders starting to hunch. “Don’t tell me we’re lost anyway. If we know when they’re set to attack, if we have enough time, we can request help from Olympus.”

“Yes, because they were so helpful before.”

I let his sarcastic answer stand, and said nothing, until he sighed and said, “I beg your pardon. You deserve a better answer than that. We both talked to Keeva. At least I did, and I suspect you did too. It was pretty plain that he couldn’t do anything to help us.”

“I don’t think that’s strictly true,” I said. “He wouldn’t do anything to help us, when the matter was that Simon might be captured and perhaps killed or traded as a hostage. Or rather that by his own rules and those of the Usaians he couldn’t do anything openly. He still, I am fairly sure, organized my return here to attempt to help. But that is not the point. The situation has changed.”

“Oh?”

“While it was a matter of Liberte seacity eating itself, it didn’t matter to the Usaians. And it’s possible that either Keeva didn’t believe the Good Men would attack or couldn’t make his own commanders believe it.”

“Likely the latter. Keeva is not stupid and knows more history than most people. I feared the Good Men would attack, and he probably does also. But it is also possible, Madame Sienna, that he meant to take the opportunity, while the Good Men were preoccupied with us, to score some point.”

“This is possible,” I said. “But now they will have word of how devastated the seacity is. It’s perfectly possible they thought the revolutionary government would be strong enough to defend the seacity from the Good Men. If so, they were not counting on Madame’s madness.”

Brisbois had stopped looking adversarial. He clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth, and said, “This is more than possible. This is likely. Very few people who have not seen Madame’s madness up close would realize that her paranoia, the counterpart of her preference for the under game and the back stab, would be reflected in her organization.

“While she was an underground leader, she looked relatively sane. After all, everyone looks sane, even if paranoid, when the paranoia is justifiable. That is, when they are outlawed and people really are seeking to capture them or kill them. But when she’s in command, turning as she does on everyone, even those who are no threat to her, and even, I have reason to believe, her own ranks—”

“You have spies in her ranks?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Let us say, instead,” he said. “That I recognized some of the names in the public executions.”

“Oh,” I said, understanding what he hadn’t said, including that he’d known some of those people, possibly that some had been friends in his misspent youth.

“Yeah,” he said. “Given enough time, I suppose she’d turn on Jean Dechausse himself, no matter how pliant he is to her wishes.” He took a deep, noisy breath, a sound like a drowning man. “All right, you have a point. Olympus’s spies are probably not in Madame’s inner circles. If we couldn’t penetrate those, I am sure they couldn’t either. And from the outside, they might have thought she would be a competent enough leader to oppose real resistance from the Good Men. But what does that mean to Olympus helping us or not?”

Everything,” I said. “Think about it from their point of view. Having the Good Men’s armies attacking Olympus is good for the Usaian movement. After all, it gives Olympus the opportunity of striking elsewhere while their enemy is busy. Classic tactics. Now, Lucius Keeva might have, out of a personal loyalty or perhaps some feeling of obligation, tried to rescue Simon, but from the point of view of strategy, a prolonged battle in which, in the end, the Good Men might suffer losses and never take Liberte was a good thing. And at any time, Olympus could ally with the revolutionary government of Liberte, and don’t say they wouldn’t, I suspect they would ally with anyone to bring about their security.”

“I wasn’t about to say anything,” Brisbois said. He rubbed his hand across his face. “I would do the same, to bring about my security. And I think you’re right, that sending you to perhaps attempt to save Simon was a sop to Keeva’s conscience. But if I follow you, what you’re saying is that the Good Men just rolling over us will not be to their best interest.”

“Think about it. Liberte itself is not much territory, but it comes with Shangri-la and with vast territorial lands and the people in them. And some of those lands are right next to the ones claimed by the Usaians, aren’t they? Up above the Olympus territories, a thin sliver, but a place from which to conduct a land war?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it and said nothing. I saw my opportunity and struck home. “So if we had halfway decent information and could send a mayday to Olympus, we stand a good chance of surviving. Perhaps even of winning.”

Brisbois nodded. He stood from the table, which creaked again with his movement, and without a word, headed out the door.

I was so startled by this that I sat there trying to figure out what it could mean. I couldn’t figure out any way that it could be a threat to me, though, and before I had time to get truly alarmed, I heard voices in the hallway. I stood as he came back with Jonathan LaForce.

Alexis closed the door, and told LaForce. “It’s secure. Now, how did you know that the Good Men were massing to attack, and what can you tell us? Do you have spies among them?”

Jonathan made a face. It was a glowering face. “I had spies,” he said slowly. “And that was one of the last reports I got, and then…” He shrugged. “They went dark. Whether they were discovered or whether the fact I lost most of my equipment and could no longer listen in on the right frequencies, or even whether in the run up to an invasion it became too difficult to get in touch with us, I don’t know. I couldn’t guess.”

“But you got information they were planning an attack?”

“Yes.”

“Reliable?”

“Yes.”

“But not when?”

“It was the beginning of their plans…”

“And if we managed to get you in touch with your assets in the Good Men camp?”

“I don’t think we could,” he said. “I mean, it’s not just a matter of equipment, though that’s part of it, but they were supposed to report in ways that depended on our being in the palace and—”

“And in charge. Yes. I set up some of those ways.”

I was thinking. I was thinking that not only was one of the abilities engineered into me the capacity to alter or improve machines, more or less intuitively, after a cursory look and a description of how they worked, but I actually knew the communications tech from Earth.

Simon and I had studied them before our expedition to Circum Terra with the Usaians. I had helped dismantle the machinery that had restricted Earth's mass communications to channels the Good Men controlled. That had involved a whole lot of learning about Earth's way of communicating.

"Do you have communication apparatus here?" I said, before realizing how stupid that was. "I mean, beyond what Simon is using. Something that could be used to scan general communications and frequencies?"

"If you mean what the Good Men are using—" LaForce started.

"That and what Madame Parris using as well."

He opened his hands. "Here is my problem, Madame Sienna. My experts and specialists are dead. They were killed in the first onslaught on the palace. I strive to do my job as best I can, but I can't raise the dead." There was a note to his tone that meant I should really be asking Brisbois. And he was right, but I doubted Brisbois could raise the dead, either. And it wasn't needed.

"If you can get me a communications apparatus, of sufficient size, I can probably harden it against interference and get both their communications streams."

A look passed from LaForce to Brisbois, but Brisbois said, "Do it. I've seen and heard things about what she can do."

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Founding Father

MOMENTS LATER I WAS IN A BACK ROOM WITH LAFORCE AND A BEVY OF VERY deferential young people. Alexis Brisbois had gone to check on Simon. Or at least he'd said he'd go back to see if Simon needed him.

I didn't mind because, if anything, there were too many people for such a tiny little room.

Or rather, the room itself wasn't little, but it was filled almost to capacity by the largest communication device I'd ever seen.

A very nervous young man in an impeccable uniform—which meant if he'd taken part in the fighting he'd changed afterwards—was explaining to me the various parts of the communication device and what they did.

What it did was polyvalent communications duty. "We can't hear the Good Men," he said. "Though we can hear the news from several continents, but those aren't shielded. And we can't hear private calls, of course."

I didn't tell him there was nothing "of course" about it. There are times one shouldn't disillusion the young. Instead, I asked him what the various dials did. Then I removed the cover of the machine and started poking around the insides and asking questions.

At this point, a dark young woman stepped forward to tell me the functions of various internal parts, until her knowledge ran out. She actually only knew enough to know how to fix the machine when it broke, not how to change it or make it do different things. That was fine. What she'd told me was enough for me to know what to do.

I sent her for tools, then asked the group in general for some parts I hadn't seen. Someone saluted me and said he would ask the quartermaster. Someone else left to ask Basil for the key to some supply area or other. In what seemed like moments, I had my screwdrivers, my wrenches, my flow meters and half a dozen things whose Earth names I was unsure about,

since they were different in my culture, and, having been invented separately, had their own names.

I was crawling around in the bowels of the machine, winding my way to replacing parts, and changing others' positions, when LaForce asked, "Can you really change it so it can catch the Good Men's communications? How would you even know what they are?"

"Because they were…because there were channels for joint force communications in the array in Circum Terra."

"But wouldn't the Patrician have known those too?" he asked. "Why didn't he—"

If I was going to have to answer for what Simon did and failed to do, we were going to have some serious problems. And besides, he wasn't a mechanic. "He wasn't the one changing the apparatus," I said. "I don't think he even knew enough to ask me what I'd done."

"What was he doing?"

"Mostly terrorizing the scientists and bureaucrats of Circum Terra so they'd leave us alone," I said. I crawled out from under the machine and realized that LaForce had been joined by Brisbois.

"How is Simon?" I asked.

"Having fun," he said, and there was just a hint of sourness to his expression. "I think he's setting us up to be attacked by these moles in the next six hours or so. But he managed to convince them to come in through a specific door."

"Six hours?"

"Most of the places are in the continents," he said. "And you, do you think you can alter that communications apparatus to do what you want?"

"I have," I said.

"You have?"

"Yes."

"Then why aren't we trying to listen to—"

"There are rather a lot of people here, aren't there, Brisbois?" I said. "Shouldn't you call whomever you want to listen in? Trusted people only?"

He cursed under his breath. "*Merde,*" and something else I didn't recognize. Then he bellowed for everyone but Jonathan LaForce and I to get out.

I smiled at him and told him he and Jonathan could listen to whatever the communications were. I wasn't likely to understand most of them anyway. I was going in search of food, since I'd had so much coffee that I was buzzing. I turned to the dark young woman and asked her where I could get a bite to eat and moments later found myself in a cafeteria, being served crusty white bread and a meaty hot soup by a servo mechanism.

The young people stayed with me, whether star-struck at being close to someone who was a friend of the Patrician or simply curious about someone who, rumor said, had come from another world, I didn't know. At any rate, none of them managed to get up the courage to ask me anything substantial.

They asked me if I was military and I told them no. Then one of the girls asked if I had children and I told her no. And then somehow they were talking about themselves, their aspirations, their hopes for Liberte.

Their hopes for Liberte, despite their being nominally the Patrician's army, mostly seemed to involve a freer life, without having to ask permission to change domicile or get a job, or the other petty restrictions of the Good Men's rule, which had led to their vaunted three hundred years of stability, in reality three hundred years of stagnation.

After a while I got worried about what exactly they'd heard. It seemed to me I could hear far-off sounds of strife, though even with my enhanced hearing I wasn't sure I wasn't imagining it. I excused myself politely from the young people, who all stood and saluted me, in answer to what rule I couldn't tell. In fact, I suspected saluting civilians was against the rules. Fortunately, I had no intention of telling on them.

Two of them wandered back with me to the communications room where I'd rigged the receiver.

There were more people there now, two young people twisting dials to different frequencies. I'd expected this and left notes on which frequencies might carry relevant payload.

Listening to whatever was coming through the receiver, on headphones, Mailys Bonheur looked very small and young. Scared, I thought, and was shocked, because Mailys had never looked scared, not even when we'd seen that poor man being killed by inches in the market. She'd looked horrified seeing the holo cast of the modern day guillotine, but I wouldn't say she'd looked scared then either. She'd helped me dispose

of the corpses of people she'd almost certainly known and respected, without a flinch.

But now she looked scared, her fingers holding the pen with which she took notes so hard I expected it to snap at any moment.

Alexis Brisbois stood glowering nearby, his shoulders against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. He had the look of a man who'd rather be anywhere else. He also had the look of a man who'd seen his death. I realized from where he was, he could see Mailys and the paper she was writing on.

The young people who'd insisted on walking me to the room took a look in, turned around and left. I didn't blame them. I would have left too, given the choice. I could tell they were shaken because they didn't even salute.

Brisbois looked up as I entered and frowned at me, as though I were a particularly unruly cat dragging a much-chewed mouse in. Then he compressed his lips and sighed. "Madame Sienna," he said, and inclined his head slightly.

"How bad is it?" I asked, at the same time someone opened the door behind me, and said, "Yes, how bad is it, Brisbois? And what is it that you're all doing without letting me know?"

I turned around and I could have slugged Simon for his paranoia, if it weren't for the fact that paranoia was the logical result of being raised as he'd been and living as he had, not to mention the shock to the system of the revolution and finding his henchman had plotted these hideouts behind his back and without his knowledge.

"I decided this, Simon," I said, my voice trying for brisk but coming out wooden. "I thought we couldn't do much unless we knew more about the enemy's intentions. Both the internal and the external enemies. So I rigged this, which seems to have been Basil's private communication device and his way of monitoring his employees' communications, to listen in on both Madame and the Good Men."

Simon's expression of amused teasing, really a cover for insecurity, vanished as though wiped out. Instead he gave me an evaluating look, long and hard, and then asked, "How did you know their frequen—" He waved a hand. "Never mind. The gadget in Circum Terra."

“Yes,” I said. “The gadget.” It had been more than a gadget—a linkage of them, all devilishly complicated—but I suspected trying to tell Simon this would only cause him to say that wasn’t important. Which would be right.

“And what we found,” Alexis said, moving off from the wall, giving the impression of a lumbering mountain shaking itself upright, “is something I don’t know how to get around. And Madame Sienna can stop taking the full blame for this, too, Simon. I fully approved of and encouraged her exploit.”

Simon’s eyebrows rose. The slightly amused look returned and the corner of his lip twitched upward. “No use defending her, Alexis. It’s not as though I could punish her. Or you. I’m not sure how much power I have in these, my nominal command centers.”

Alexis made the sound commonly transcribed as *pfui*, but his expression didn’t change. “I don’t think,” he said, “you are that stupid. You know very well all of these people would follow you, if you required it. They respect me, but they were raised to revere you. They might at times have had their doubts about you, but I’ve seen you command their obedience with a look.” He glared at Simon as though he’d given him offense. “Which is why, my friend, we’re going to need you.”

Simon’s smirk vanished and his expression became alert. He looked from Brisbois to Mailys and seemed, for the first time, to realize what their expressions meant and that they didn’t look in full command of themselves. His gaze swept over me, and returned to Alexis again. “How bad is it?”

Mailys swept off her headphones and swallowed. “It means this,” she said. “That the Good Men have deployed a massive coalition from all the territories they control.” She hesitated. “Not overwhelming, mind, but massive, the kind of coalition that could easily overwhelm not just Liberte but also Shangri-la and the territories, without pausing to pick up the corpses.” She sighed. “Even if we had our former force, we couldn’t have defeated them in straight combat because they are better equipped and battle-hardened. And they have troops that have been fighting for the last few years.”

“Yeah, against the Olympus coalition,” Simon said.

“You’ll have to ask them for help,” Alexis and I said at the same time.

Simon waved to us. “Undoubtedly,” he said. “But can we win even with them?”

Alexis pursed his lips. He removed the note pad from in front of Mailys and looked at it. “How…interesting,” he said, then he looked at Alexis. “I suggest we ask Olympus to help as soon as possible. If they won’t help, it’s best to know right away.”

“So we know how best to die?” Alexis said.

Simon ignored him, and looked up at me. “*Ma petite*, can you harden this communication device so no one can spy on us, as we spy on them?”

“No,” I said, honestly. “I mean, someone with my abilities on the other side will still be able to spy on us, but—”

“But not a mere mortal? *C’est bien, ma petite.*”

“I don’t see how even Olympus can break us out of this,” Brisbois said. “And I don’t see how you can convince them. Zen thinks if we make them see that if they don’t help us, they’ll face an enlarged enemy, it will convince them, but I doubt it. After all, they can’t count on us in either case. Not in the situation we’re in right now.” And then, as though dragging himself back from a long distance. “And how was your little deception?”

Simon shook his head. “They’re on their way, of course. At that, you might know more than I do?”

Mailys made a sound and Simon looked at her. “Yes, *ma petite*?” Which he’d apparently decided to call every female.

Mailys shook her head. “Monsieur, it isn’t that your deception didn’t work.”

“But—”

“But someone overheard your conversation at the other end, and they have called Madame, who also intends to attack…here.”

“*Epatante*,” Simon said and smiled. I had the impression his smile was brittle and glassy, a thing that might crack and fail at any moment. “It never rains, but it pours. Mailys, go and tell Monsieur Basil about our…ah… expected guests. And you.” He smiled at another young woman standing by the buttons. “Do put me in touch with Olympus as soon as possible.”

The young woman snapped a salute, turned bright red, and started moving dials. I said “Wait.”

Simon looked at me and raised his eyebrows. “I don’t think you want to call some sort of general exchange in the Good Man’s palace in

Olympus, do you?”

Simon twisted his mouth. “Indeed not, *ma petite*. I hear there is a lot of…ah, bureaucracy going on in Olympus right now…and other people might not be as understanding. A moment,” he told the woman at the controls. Then he rattled off a complex set of letters and numbers that I recognized as the sort of private code that people gave their friends and close acquaintances.

Having gathered that there was no love lost between them, I found myself flabbergasted when the image of Lucius Keeva materialized, large and startled, in front of the apparatus. He was wearing a robe and held a towel in his right hand. His wet hair was plastered to his head, looking two shades darker than its normal golden-blond. Behind him was the bed with its improbable stuffed giraffe.

As he focused on who had called him, he pulled back the hand with which he must have pushed a receiving button on a com, and he blinked stupidly. “Simon?”

Simon nodded. “Himself.”

“But they said…”

“That I was dead? Don’t let it worry you,” Simon said, and launched into a rapid-fire description of what had happened and our situation. Well, those parts of our situation that pertained to the Good Men. Somewhere in the middle of it, Lucius dropped his towel, cinched the robe around himself and looked like he’d very much like to let loose with a string of inspired profanity. He didn’t. When Simon stopped, Lucius rubbed the middle of his forehead. “And what do you expect me to do in this, St. Cyr?”

It seemed to me we were about to see a repeat of my interview with the former Good Man Keeva.

“I expect you,” Simon said, “to lend what aid you can.” He spoke very gently, almost sweetly, as though what he was saying was a matter of sweet sanity and nothing more. “Because if you don’t, it’s not just Liberte that will be taken over. It is also the territories, and I think you would not enjoy having hostiles so close to your territories.”

“Not my—” Lucius started, reflexively, but then changed, seemingly midsentence. “Look, right now there’s fighting going on there, and we’re doing what we can to keep it from spilling across the border. The volunteers have deployed.”

“Meaning farm boys armed with burners?” Simon asked. “Imagine how much fun it will be for them when the awesome might of the Good Men descends upon them with armored vehicles.”

“They won’t. I mean, we can deploy forces to fight off the planned invasion there. I don’t think you understand, Simon, the kind of force needed to fight off the takeover of both of your seacities and the territories in both continents.”

“I have some idea,” Simon said. “Think of all the people who will be summarily executed, if the Good Men take over.”

“Think of the people your own people have executed, St. Cyr. Or at least think of the people who have been executed by their own co-citizens in the last few days. I’m not absolutely sure the best thing to do to your damned seacities isn’t putting it all to fire and the burner.”

I said, “No,” and took a step forward before I knew what I was doing. I could only think of everyone in the seacity who had been on our side. I didn’t know what LaForce had done with his wife and children and the little Tieri, but I was sure that be they ever so well-hidden and secure, if they were still on the seacity they would be killed. As would be a lot of other innocents.

Surely, the seacity seemed to have gone mad, but from all I’d seen, most people—those who weren’t allied with Madame and those who were not on any lists of improved people—were just hiding, keeping quiet, hoping the storm would pass them by. I suspected Madame’s followers were no more than maybe ten percent of the people, and to them had attached the normal number of psychopaths and evildoers that exist in every population.

That left a large number that had done nothing worse than be too scared to fight.

If the Good Men descended upon Liberte and Shangri-la, in the kind of numbers they had assembled, probably more than a hundred thousand armored, equipped, trained soldiers, the place would be scoured of life, and then either left as ruins and a warning, or rebuilt to suit their new master.

It was blindingly obvious to me that, while most of the time when a seacity was taken over, it was only the cadres and the high officers who got killed, in this case, after the sort of rebellion that had taken place here, it would be everyone. The Good Men, most of whom were more paranoid

than Simon, would not allow anyone who had seen the rule of one of their own overturned to live.

Like slave owners of some old civilization, who killed every slave in a house where a slave had killed the master, they'd destroy the population of Liberte. It would be no more than a legend, howling down the centuries, scaring children.

"No," I said to the blond giant who looked startled and stared at me, as though noticing me for the first time. "You can't just ignore it. Most of the people are not guilty of anything except being normal and scared. You can't just let them die. You—the armies of Olympus—must lend us aid."

"Dear Lady," he said, and his voice was very calm, with a sad kind of intonation. "What good will it do to send our troops to die along with you?"

I was right, and it was a repetition of what I'd experienced when I'd first seen him, and I couldn't take it. I couldn't endure it. I wanted to reach through and shake the real man through the hologram. "You must realize," I said, my voice sounding colder and more distant than I'd ever heard it, "that if you don't help those on your side while you can, even against great odds, when the monster comes for you, there will be no one to save you."

"But if I kill myself before there is any need, and in response to nothing more than nominal allies, what good will it do me? I mean, let's suppose I send the troops of Olympus to help you, St. Cyr, which is not exactly how it works, since I have no legislation over the general troops of the seacity and can't in fact do anything like that. Let's suppose I send them to rescue you, and we lose so many battalions that we're not able to defend ourselves? Then the monster eats us now, Madame Sienna, and what good will that do me, my seacity or the Usaian cause? Suppose that we do that and lose all our forces. Then what? And that's supposing I can send troops. It will be hard, since right now the legitimate government of the seacity is in flux, and it seems to us that the Sans Culottes St. Cyr encouraged are set on destroying the isle and possibly every other place they can reach."

"What if there were a substantial number of Usaians on the seacity?" a small, very young voice asked, from the side of the console. I looked, startled to find that Mailys had spoken. "Would you then lend aid?"

Lucius tried to look at her and couldn't, not in the position she was in. He frowned slightly. "There can't be any large population of Usaians on Liberte," he said, sounding more as if he hoped it was true than that he

believed it. “We had a couple of stranded tourists from Olympus, and we made pickup—”

“But what if there is a large group of Usaians on Liberte?” Jonathan LaForce spoke, his voice sounding hoarse and tight, the voice of someone possessed by some overpowering emotion. “Secret Usaians, as your religion was secret in Olympus before the revolution.”

“There can’t be,” Lucius said. He sounded mildly horrified. “Liberte has the Sans Culottes. They’re not a religion, but they believe in the principles of the French Republic, and they think—”

“No. Not a religion. But Usaians are a religion. A secret religion passed down from father to son, from father to children. From *Father*—”

“Monsieur Keeva, you might want to check in the records of your religion, a gentleman by the name of Doctor Dufort. A line of them, in fact. Faithful.”

Lucius’s eyes went wide. It was obvious the name was familiar. “It can’t be,” he said.

“But I assure you it is,” Alexis said. “I, Alexander Hamilton Brisbois, tell you so, and Jonathan Dayton LaForce will corroborate me, as will—”

There was a sound from the other side. Keeva turned around. “Martha. Martha.”

Someone answered. I could hear him asking a confused question from which “Dufort” emerged. And then “How many?” followed by “No. Oh, hell no.”

“Monsieur Keeva,” Brisbois said, very loudly. “Will you lend aid? There are over a thousand of us, and we’re in places, and in positions, from which we cannot be safely retrieved. It is more economical to lend aid to the seacity. I wouldn’t betray their secret, nor would I call you into our civil war. But this is certain death bearing down on us. Will you help us, Monsieur Keeva?”

Lucius Keeva ran his hand backward through his hair, and succeeded in nothing except make it stand on end and pile up in odd ways. “Damn you,” he said. “Damn you. The army of Olympus is not the army of the Usaians.”

“No, but the army of Olympus is a Usaian army, because the regime is a Usaian regime.”

“Damn you.”

“Yes, Monsieur Keeva, but will you help?”

“I’ll call—I’ll endeavor to do what I can,” he said. “I…damn you…I’ll call up everyone I can.”

The sound of a deafening explosion and the call was broken, as floor and ceiling both shook.

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Dare

I WAS FIGHTING IN A CORRIDOR, WITH COLD SALTWATER LAPPING AT MY KNEES. IT was laced with blood, and the spume collecting around the walls of the hallway was tinged pink.

Madame's forces had come in not through any of the guarded entrances, but by making their own entrance via high-impact explosives. The first line of defenders who had run to the site had died almost immediately, but that had given time for the alarm to be sounded. By the time I made it out of the communications room and towards the sounds of fighting, the battle was well and truly engaged.

Fortunately, it hadn't occurred to Madame to put the invaders in the uniform of Simon's guard, or even not to put them in bright red uniforms with Liberty caps tightly on their heads. Which was good, because otherwise we'd have had a lot of friendly fire incidents.

As it was, something had gone wrong with the power, so that the lights overhead flickered and waned, making it hard to aim and to see whom you were burning. Or I presume it made it hard for most people. I could still see. I also had the advantage of not being in a white suit, which would be more visible in this gloom than my indifferent, gray, armored suit.

Mailys, beside me, wore something much like what I did, but was very visible by the pallor of her face. She didn't talk, just walked beside me, each of us looking towards the side the other couldn't see and burning anything that moved and wore red. Burn, burn. A distant scream. We came to an intersection, and down my way there was a melee. Three guards in white were fighting two intruders in red. I aimed carefully and took down one of the invaders. The three other men—or women, at this distance, it was hard to tell—jumped the remaining one.

A burner ray passed near my ear, but I heard Mailys fire, even as she said under her breath. "I'm sorry. Missed one. Was crouching."

Down the hallway and three more encounters. A man running at us, blazing his burner erratically, got burned by both of us at the same time, but not before he'd burnt a hole along the side of my pants. It wasn't important. We were now up to our hips in water, and Mailys said, "I wonder if there's anyone alive past this," just before we were attacked.

There were five men and two women. I didn't see them. They had the foresight to wear something dark. And they knit themselves with the wall. If the first burner had been aimed at me, I'd have died.

But instead it blazed at Mailys. She saw it, and jumped out of the way, firing back as she did.

I'd had time to fire, twice, in the general direction the shot came from, then I jumped, forward and to the side, as a ray swept where I'd been. I shot again. Mailys was burning against both walls, in a long continuous line, barely missing me.

There were sounds of bodies hitting the water. I didn't know if they were my kills or hers, and I didn't intend to investigate.

It seemed like an instant, and simultaneously like forever. There were corpses floating in the water. One of them was a young, blond man, looking surprised. There was no resemblance whatsoever to Len, yet he reminded me of Len.

I turned to Mailys. "Are you wounded?"

She shook her head. "No. You?"

"No."

A ribbon of red blood threaded delicately through the water, like a festival decoration. My throat caught.

"Zen?" It was a whisper, but I recognized the voice. I turned around and saw Alexis coming from the direction our enemies had come from, walking towards us, the water just above his knees. He shoved a corpse away. He almost casually reached out and pulled back a strand of my hair that clung to my face with sweat I didn't remember sweating. His fingers felt rough but it was a comfort. I can't explain it. It was right when he touched me. "Are you hit?" he asked in a sort of raspy whisper. Behind him Mailys made a sound I couldn't identify. I scanned the corridor and saw no threats. I shook my head. "Not that I know."

He nodded. "I need help."

"All right. What kind of help?"

He shook his head. “Come.”

“I’ll—I’ll come too,” Mailys said.

“Hold back a bit, Mailys. I don’t want you in this.”

I wasn’t sure what *this* was, nor why he wanted me in what whatever it was.

“I should continue that way,” Mailys said. “Towards the breach.”

“No,” Alexis said. “Nobody alive there. Not theirs. Not ours.” He twirled his com ring violently and rasped into it. “The corridor is cleared. You can send workmen to clean up and stop water coming in. I slapped a membrane on it, but it’s not fitted.”

Which explained why the water hadn’t submerged us all, with a breach under the sea level. I presumed he’d swum to the entrance, slapped the membrane on and then fought his way back. I couldn’t know, but it was the only way I could see it happening.

We walked back, in the water, till we met a crew coming the other way. Clearly workmen, even if in uniforms. They carried tools, not weapons. Two carried a large section of dimatough between them. They grew silent as they crossed our path, and I got the impression they shied away from us.

At the end of the corridor, there were people. Many people. Some staring into the tunnel, others patrolling the large central space with burner in hand.

Basil was one of them and looked at Brisbois enquiringly.

“There are no more this way. Basil, where is he?”

“He?”

“The Good Man. Simon.”

Basil opened his mouth. “I…He was—”

“Yes, I bet he was,” Alexis Brisbois said, in an exasperated tone. “You let him go, didn’t you? You let him go from your sight?”

“He’s not my prisoner,” Basil said.

“No indeed,” Brisbois agreed. And then said, “Five trusted people, Basil. Five of them, and bring them to the meeting room on the second floor. The one where I destroyed the camera. And don’t tell me there wasn’t a camera there.”

Basil shook his head, then looked around and called five names.

They beat us to the meeting room by the expedient of keeping ahead of us.

“The cameras in other levels, Basil,” Brisbois said. “I know you have them. And I know you have some apparatus that will allow us to see what they capture. I want you to bring the apparatus here and I want to see where they are.”

“They?” Basil asked.

“Jean Dechausse and his strike force. Oh, don’t look like a guppy, man. Couldn’t you tell the breakin was diversionary? They knew we’d deal with it. Madame sent her expendable cannon fodder this way. Now, where is the real attack? The one with Dechausse and her trusted henchmen?”

Basil nodded and went out. I noted that Brisbois was tense in his absence, but when he returned with a small square machine and set it on the table, Brisbois’s agitation seemed to increase.

The machine projected a hologram, and it took me no time to figure out we were zooming in on various hallways, moving away from this room, to a perimeter of the outer rooms of the compound, the outer corridors following the wall. It seemed to me that we were in fact zooming along from room to room, but I understood it was more a matter of switching pickup cameras along the way.

“I don’t see why you’re so convinced that Dechausse would be here,” Basil said. “She would never risk him—” His voice died in a hiss, because the camera had picked up something, a man who moved surprisingly well despite his balding head and his clearly middle-aged body. There was silence for a few minutes, and then he said, “That is not—is that Dechausse?”

“Yes,” Brisbois said. “That’s Jean Dechausse.”

And, in fact, watching him, I realized this was the little bald man who had stood atop the cliff and tried to kill Alexis with a grenade. I blinked as he glided along the hallways.

“Why does he glide like that?” Basil said. “He seems like a sneaky coward.”

“Oh, no, no, no. A sneaky fighter, rather. I don’t think he’s so much afraid of dying, though perhaps he is, as he can’t conceive of dying…” He shrugged.

Basil looked at him, and said, “Like that, huh?”

“Worse.” Brisbois shrugged. “But he’s not an idiot and he will not be here alone.”

Brisbois leaned over and tapped his fingers on the controls to the machine, sending our pickups careening again, down the hallway. It was empty, as far as he could follow. “Basil, where would they have come in for him to be there and not to have been seen? Or if he was seen to have been by no more than one or two people he could kill before they gave the alarm?”

“Ah,” Basil said. He bit his lower lip, as though in deep thought, then nodded. “The ventilation shaft. To come down that way, they’d have to have cut part of it away. They’d also have to have had a map of this place.”

“Well, we know we had traitors among us.”

“Well said. And I’ve already sent word to the other centers, sir, for lockdown, because I imagine even if they didn’t know you and the Patrician were here, they were bound to have come up with some way to neutralize the other centers. I’ll now let them know that poison in vent shafts might be a way they try it. I wonder why not here?”

“Because, I presume, even if they removed the filters, and managed to get poison in, it would take days or weeks to clean all the bodies, and it might never be sure that Simon was dead. And if Simon isn’t dead…”

“Yes, the people won’t fully transfer their loyalty to Madame?”

Alexis waved the argument away. “Not that, precisely,” he said. “Possibly, to some extent. Again, the revolutionaries are a small minority, and the people who are loyal to the regime are probably still loyal to Simon as well.

“He is, after all, the Good Man. No, I think it’s because she knows the Good Men are attacking. I think she thinks she can buy peace by proving to them that Simon, who defied and rebelled against them, is gone.”

“And you don’t think it would work?” Basil said.

Brisbois snorted, a snort that turned into a laugh. “No. They will never, ever forgive anyone not a Good Man that kills one of them. I saw enough of it in the archives of Simon’s father when I took over the secret service. But Rose was never in that privileged a position. She wouldn’t know. They simply cannot allow one of them to be killed by anyone but the rest of them. If they do so, then their regime won’t be secure, anywhere. The idea of invincibility must be maintained.” He paused. “Mind you, they might

have told her that they'll forgive all in return for Simon's body. It'd be like them to get one of their enemies to kill the other, and eliminate the amount of work they have to do."

"But they think Simon is dead!" Brisbois said.

"I doubt it. My guess is they knew very well what capabilities Simon's father had in place in terms of cloning and doubles, and they won't believe the revolutionaries killed Simon unless they have the body and can examine and test it. Which is the point. Rose can't afford to have the corpse be in such a state they'd think it was a decoy, like the one she beheaded. My guess is the Good Men asked the body be turned over, and Rose examined it and realized the deception."

"So now?"

"So now, she'll have sent her best—not just Dechausse but her best—hunting for Simon." He leaned over and tapped the machine.

"She wouldn't send Dechausse alone?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Brisbois said. "She might be a cold woman, but she prizes Dechausse too much to—No, I lie. He's the only person of whose loyalty she's sure, and therefore he's precious to her. They might be…They are treacherous and murderously ambitious people, but they are, in their way a stable couple. I think that in the last few years each was the only one the other could trust. And I don't think they can trust anyone else right now. But they can't be that far behind him. Where are they?"

The next camera captured a group of people.

There were ten. They wore black suits, with a sort of sheen that told me they were woven through with dimatough fibers. And the way they walked told me they were enhanced too.

I took a step back, involuntarily.

Brisbois sighed. "Yes," he said. "They are of us. And we're the ones who must take them out. Basil, Madame Sienna and I will take care of this. Try to keep pickups on us. Also, have someone find that fool boy—the Patrician—Simon St. Cyr, and have him kept out of this. We can't afford to lose him, because if we do, we'll already have lost our cause. Or at least it will make it exponentially harder to rally everyone in these centers to fight and to calm the citizenry afterwards. Not to mention figure out how to run this madhouse without his gifts. But if you don't stop him, he'll walk right into the middle of this. He was very badly educated and has a wholly

romantic idea of adventure and gallantry. He'll think it's his duty to face this."

"But Brisbois, if he should order—"

"Ignore him. Tranquilize him if you have to," Brisbois said, as Basil looked not only doubtful but appalled. "However, before all that, get me and Madame Sienna a half a dozen burners with full charges. Issue model, if possible, because they're sturdier. We'll go and try to stop this, before they get so far in the compound they can take hostages to exchange for the Patrician, or worse, they run into the Patrician himself."

Basil looked at the people in the pick-up camera. "It's suicide," he said. "You can tell they're all enhanced."

"Oh, yes," Brisbois said. "I can tell, but they're not enhanced like Madame Sienna. And Dechausse is at least as enhanced as I am. Maybe more. Keep an eye on us. If we die, tell Jonathan. He's the next capable of gathering the most enhanced people to try to defend us. If nothing else, we should be able to delay them so you and your people can get Simon—the Patrician—out of the way." He gave me a shaky smile, and I wondered if he believed what he was saying, or if he was willing to sacrifice both of us to give the others more time at defense.

And this was when I got upset. "Brisbois," I said. "That might be the most stupid plan in the history of stupid plans."

I didn't realize I'd actually spoken aloud until I heard the words coming out of my mouth. He clearly couldn't believe his ears.

"I don't care how not enhanced they are," I said and realized I was being brutally honest in a way I usually wasn't. Ever since my foster parents had told me I was the best and the brightest and no one could equal me, I'd been careful not to hurt the feelings of normal people. But Brisbois wasn't normal, and I wasn't going to be careful while he went merrily into the jaws of death. "There are thirteen of them, and I understand that Jean Dechausse is at least as enhanced as you are. We are not going to march bravely up the hallway and let them shoot us. It only takes one burner blast to kill you. And one doesn't care if it comes from an enhanced or nonenhanced person."

I don't know what I expect. Anger, I suppose, or mockery. If I'd made the same speech to Simon, he'd have laughed at me, and come up with some light counter banter.

Brisbois stared. He pursed his lips. “What do you suggest then? I know you are saying that numbers matter, but we can’t let these people risk themselves while we’re the ones who are enhanced and while—”

And suddenly I understood. I understood Brisbois’s need to keep others safe—his need, perhaps, to sacrifice himself. Everything he’d done, everything certainly that I’d put him through and which he’d endured more gracefully than he deserved, his quasi-paternal relationship with Simon. All of it was an attempt to…what? Atone for a crime he hadn’t committed?

I refused to take my own medicine and look at myself the same way. Instead I turned to Basil and asked, “Are there corridors above the one they’re in?”

He nodded, looking from one to the other of us, as though he wasn’t sure what to expect.

“Then why, in the name of all that’s holy,” I started, rounding on Alexis Brisbois, “can’t we just cut a small hole ahead of a point they’ll pass, track them by sound, and then throw a grenade down?”

“Zen!” he said, one of the few times he eschewed the Madame Sienna nonsense. “You know better than that. We don’t know where Simon is. It could be him passing beneath.”

I didn’t ask if Simon routinely made enough noise for a dozen people. He might. I said, “There has to be a way to monitor…”

Basil gestured at the machine. “There is a portable view,” he said. “You could monitor.”

Brisbois said, “But it seems…”

“Yes? What? Unsporting? Unfair? It is not a game.”

I had the impression Basil had choked back a laugh. But when I looked at him out the corner of my eye, he didn’t at all look amused.

Brisbois said, quietly. “It seems like murder.”

“And killing them in a fight isn’t?” I asked.

“Well, now, you know they’re going to kill you then.”

“Alexis Brisbois,” I said, realizing in horror I sounded like my foster mom when Dad said something strange. “Do you mean to tell me you think that Jean Dechausse is here to give you chocolates?”

This time I heard it, and I was sure Basil guffawed. I didn’t look at him, because if I did I would have to take notice of it. I noted that Brisbois was also determinedly not looking that way. He’d blushed dark red.

“Understand,” he said. “These used to be my friends, my…my comrades. It feels strange to—to kill them without seeing them face to face.” He took a deep breath. “But you are right. There is too much at stake to let ourselves be killed for a quixotic notion.”

And I said nothing, understanding that to him his life would always have a conditional value, and not sure whether I was flattered, or maybe appalled, he’d chosen me as his companion in what he’d intended to be a self-sacrifice.

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Operation Chaos

THAT WAS HOW WE FOUND OURSELVES WALKING DOWN THE UPPER CORRIDOR, SIDE by side. I was hyperaware of Brisbois: his smell of sweat and soap, his steps, cautious on the concrete floor, and almost soundless in a way that was odd for such a big man.

But I was aware of more than that, and couldn't even tell how. I was so hyperaware of the tension and the way he moved, that I'd swear I could feel his tense muscles, his tightly clenched hands.

Or perhaps what I felt were my own and I projected.

I had a hand in my pocket, my fingers tight on the butt of a burner.

And there were two of us going up against ten people.

We were not stupid, so after studying the physical plant of the compound, we'd taken the hallway above the one the intruders had taken.

Out towards this end of the center, it was all storage rooms and empty. We advanced with our ears alert for sounds from beneath.

I heard something, a sort of rustle. It was hard to be sure. But I strained, thought it was more than one pair of feet. I looked at Brisbois, a meaningful look, and he pulled out the little remote device, about the size of his admittedly outsized palm, which allowed him to project the holo of the floor below.

It seemed forever before it formed, but it took only two of my breaths.

And then we saw them. Too close, coming towards the point below us too fast. We could back up, but at the clip they were moving it wouldn't earn us anything. Jean Dechausse was in the lead.

I switched my burner to cutting strength, and started cutting a broad circle in the dimatough floor. It took two seconds before Brisbois flung the portable unit down, the hologram above it tiny and distorted seen from above.

As the circle of dimatough crashed in front of them, Jean Dechausse jumped.

And then Brisbois was dropping the grenade through. It hit with a small click, and we were both diving in different directions and covering our heads.

The explosion echoed, deafening.

I opened my eyes, staring head first at the little holo. In which a figure in blue dress was running away. Or perhaps not running away, because he was running further into the compound, past the point we were at, towards the center, towards where other people, where innocents were.

It took me a second to orient, and then I realized he'd jumped ahead right after the dimatough dropped through, and he was too far out of range.

He was running hell for leather down the corridor, and I jumped through the hole after him, rolling myself in a ball as I fell the six feet below, landing with a jar that rattled my brains, but with no injury. I got to my feet and moved after Dechausse, who ran like a lizard.

I don't know how else to describe his fast, darting movements.

Whatever else he was or wasn't enhanced for, he was at least as enhanced as I was for speed. He ran as though he glided, too fast for the eye to fully follow.

Behind me I heard Brisbois say *"Merde,"* and felt the floor vibrate as he dropped down. I realized that we'd both run through quite a lot of what remained of people, but we weren't shot, so if any of Dechausse's escort remained alive, they must be too stunned to react.

We closed on him, but Jean ran like the Devil pursued him, which metaphorically perhaps he did, as Brisbois looked like nothing on Earth as he lunged forward, teeth clenched.

I think Brisbois yelled *"arret"* but I couldn't be sure. My sides ached and I was panting. All your enhancing goes for nothing when you've not been keeping in shape, and when over the last days you've worried too much and slept far too little.

I realized we were running towards the center where Simon and Brisbois and I had battled the traitors among the personnel in this compound.

I wondered where Simon was. And just as I did, he came out of the corner, just in front of Dechausse, a burner in hand, and yelled "Stop," in

Glaish, followed by *"Arret."*

Only he'd been too close. I didn't think Dechausse could stop if he wanted to, and he didn't want to. He careened into Simon. Both went sprawling. Dechausse got up first, burner in hand. "Get up, get up, get up," he said, as he aimed a kick at Simon. Reaching down, he pulled Simon up by the arm. Simon was acting stunned, and truth be told, he was probably stupid with lack of sleep or he would never have stood that close in front of a careening enemy.

Jean Dechausse hauled him up, arm around his middle, immobilizing him, burner to head in the classic position of hostage holding.

Brisbois and I slid to a stop. I realized we were not the only ones here of the compound's defenders. Rather, they thronged along the walls, and some came closer. For a moment, I had the impression someone had summoned them, and they'd all come to rescue Simon. Then I realized our arrival had been so fast that we'd caught everyone in the middle of their daytime movements which, of necessity, took a lot of them through this space, central to the compound.

People were carrying trays of food, and others were walking in couples. Only one or two had started reaching for their burners when they stopped, faced with this situation.

Dechausse looked around the vast hall. "Come any closer, any of you, and I blow the Good Man's brains out."

Brisbois was near me, panting, and I wanted to ask him if Dechausse wouldn't blow Simon's brains out anyway, if that hadn't always been the purpose, but I was afraid Dechausse would hear us. And then I thought that Dechausse, just like us, had fought himself to a standstill.

He couldn't just kill Simon, because if he blew Simon's brains out, he'd never leave here alive. Even if he killed two or three of us, even if he killed Brisbois and me, he'd never escape revenge from the hundreds of loyal people who had sworn fealty to Simon and who still, in one way or another, served him.

And if he didn't blow Simon's brains out, then what? He couldn't hope to make it out of here, dragging Simon behind him.

For one thing, while Simon had miscalculated and acted like an idiot, he wasn't an idiot. Which meant at some point, in Jean Dechausse's trek to

an exit point, Simon would recover enough to wrestle the burner out of his captor's hand. Or die trying. But in that case, Dechausse would still lose.

"Jean," Brisbois bellowed, his voice so loud the dimatough walls vibrated. "Jean, you're trapped. You can't get out of this in any way. If you kill him, we kill you. If you try dragging him to the door, he'll fight you and then you'll still get killed. And at any rate, you won't have his corpse for Madame to show the Good Men. In either case, you lose. Put the burner down, Jean," Brisbois said. "Remember we were friends once."

"I was never your friend," Dechausse said. "I never liked you, Alexis Brisbois, you and your servile disposition. You and your meek, self-effacing wish to serve those who created us, those who held us in subjugation. I thought I'd killed you once. I would like it to be true." As he spoke the last sentences, he moved the burner from Simon's head, quickly, so quickly that normal eyes wouldn't be able to follow it, and aimed it at Brisbois.

Before he could fire, Simon seized his opportunity and pushed an elbow into Dechausse's solar plexus.

And I saw my opportunity. If I didn't do something, Dechausse was going to shoot Simon in the arm or the leg, possibly after he shot Brisbois. I couldn't let that happen, but with Simon struggling in Dechausse's grasp, I also couldn't be sure that I wouldn't burn Simon. I had to trust. I had to trust my speed, my accuracy and my superhuman reaction time, just when it was pitted against people if not as enhanced, close enough that I couldn't be sure of them.

It was like a series of pictures, flash, flash, flash, as I pulled my burner from my pocket. Now I saw Dechausse's head, and now Simon's was in front of it, and now it was Dechausse again.

I looked, and I aimed, and I pressed the trigger.

The bright ray flew.

For a moment Dechausse and Simon stood there, Dechausse's arm around Simon, his burner pointed at Brisbois, and then—

Brains and blood splatted onto Simon's cheek, and he jumped away from Dechausse, who fell to the floor, a heap of cooling meat.

I turned around feeling like it had been a million years, more or less, since I'd dropped through that hole to chase Dechausse. "Alexis," I said. "Are you—" I couldn't stand the idea that Alexis might have got severely hurt.

Brisbois was clutching a shoulder. “I think it’s just a scratch,” he said, hoarsely.

“And this suit is quite ruined,” Simon said, from so close by, I turned around to look at him. “But thank you for asking if I was injured too.”

I felt too tired to spar with him, too old to care, too bone-weary to answer his flip, joking tone.

I wanted to say I knew he was well from the way he jumped, but instead, it was Brisbois who answered. “I could murder you,” he said.

Simon looked genuinely surprised, if at the words or the venom in them I couldn’t tell. “Alexis!” he said, and I understood in the tone shock at what Alexis had said, yes, but also at being addressed that way by someone who, in public at least, had always been a respectful servitor, an inferior effacing himself so his liege Lord could look infallible. “Alexis!”

“Oh, don’t you ‘Alexis’ me,” Brisbois said. “You could have gotten yourself killed, you infernal nuisance. I’ve told you before that it is not your job to have gallant adventures nor to run grand schemes. You’re more important than any of us and you shouldn’t risk yourself stupidly. And besides, if you hadn’t refused to sleep, you’d not have been so stupid as to botch that move, if you’d decided to stop him, and besides you should learn your place and stay in it.”

He stopped, giving the impression that he’d not stopped because he’d said all he had to say, but rather that he’d stopped because he’d run out of breath to yell at Simon anymore.

Simon stood, looking like he was trying to decide whether to be incensed or amused.

But before he composed his lips to either scowl or smile, a slow clap sounded.

We turned in the direction of the sound to see two dozen men in the sky-blue uniform of Olympus seacity, standing near the tunnel that led to the official entrance to the compound.

Their leader was clapping.

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The Wave of Compulsion

I WAS SO STARTLED IT TOOK ME A SECOND TO RECOGNIZE NATHANIEL REMY, leader of the Olympus armies and linked by gossip to Lucius Keeva.

He looked as he usually looked: cool and collected, blond hair perfectly cut and gleaming, the sky-blue uniform accentuating his tall, slim person.

But I could tell from the shimmer that this was not his normal uniform but one woven through with dimatough threads. And he carried, along with two burners in holsters on either side of his hips, a huge burner of the kind they called a ship-buster strapped to his back. He met my gaze and grinned at me, as though sharing a joke, then looked at Brisbois. “You haven’t said nearly enough, even if I don’t know what the commotion was about. All I know is that it must have been riveting, since there was only this man to recognize us and let us in,” he gestured towards Jonathan LaForce, at his side. Then he nodded. “And now, suppose we start getting plans together. If the Good Men are attacking when you say they are, the seacity and all its inhabitants will be sitting ducks.”

Brisbois found his voice again, then, though he still sounded subdued as he said, “How did you get here so fast?”

“We weren’t very distant,” Nat Remy said. “And we used brooms. I brought everyone who was proficient on one.”

“I see,” Brisbois said, visibly ogling the gaudy uniforms.

“No, you don’t,” Nat said, dismissively. “We were wearing broomer suits over this. Dark ones, so we could fly unnoticed.”

“It’s night then?” I asked.

“Yes,” Nat said, “which means that we have less than twelve hours to see what we can do about defending this disorganized and indefensible mess.

Somehow—and I'd swear it was Nat who herded us, perhaps because he had experience of military command—we ended up in a meeting room, sitting down. Brisbois had torn through his suit to see what lay beneath and was apparently satisfied that he wasn't mortally wounded. There was a slight tinge of blood on his sleeve, but he certainly didn't seem to be bleeding out.

We were sitting around, again, and someone—I wasn't even sure whom or responding to whose command—brought me a cup of coffee with an excess of sugar. I drank it as if my life depended on it, which this late, and after what I'd been through, it might.

Simon told Nat what had happened, in concise sentences. He too was drinking coffee. He looked like he too was about to pass out and that only the caffeine and sugar might keep him going. He saw me looking and shook his head slightly, as though to say the gash on his arm wasn't any big thing.

"So," Nat said, as Simon described the run-up to the scene that Nat had walked in on. "You were being infantile and an ass."

Simon made a face and, curiously, cast a look of resentment at Alexis. "I would like to take control of my fate. I am not just what I was born to be, not just a symbol. I—"

"Stow it," Nat said, without rancor. "I've heard all this from better men than you. You are what you are. So are all of us. And what we are right now is sitting ducks." He stood. Standing like that, while the rest of us sat he made himself appear to be a teacher before an infant class.

I couldn't read the insignia above the badge of a mountain on the right side of his chest, but I knew from Simon's talk, if nothing else, that Nat was one of the Usaian commanders, second or functional second to their main commander, Herrera.

When I'd seen him before on the raid to Circum Terra, he'd looked uncontrolled and more than a little homicidal, but I'd realized before this that that had been an act, as much of an act as Simon's inconsequential fool routine. Now he put on the authority and the command, and it didn't even occur to me to stand up. Worse, it didn't occur to Simon. We sat there, as Nat Remy drew in a deep breath. I got the impression he wanted to say *Merde*, but perhaps wasn't bilingual. What came out of his mouth was more opaque. "By the Founders, you're a pretty lot. What in hell's blazes were Usaians doing playing at being Sans Culottes? Or were you playing?"

“I was raised in the faith,” Alexis said. “And in the secret. But then I grew up and I wanted…I wanted to be…They promised we could be equal. And when it turned out they couldn’t enforce it, or even a pretense of it, I returned to the faith of my fathers. Well, the closest thing I had to a father. And then when…when…” He looked at Simon. “I was working for the Good Man, who was not a Usaian, and I didn’t know how he’d take to knowing his handmade and delivered servants were…that is…”

“Yeah. I know the feeling,” Nat said, bitterness at the back of his amused tone. He glanced quickly at Simon. “You’re not a secret Usaian yourself, are you? Because if you claim to be, so help me, I’m going to ask you who swore you in, and why I wasn’t told.”

Simon shook his head dumbly. “No. Am I supposed to be?”

“No. Oh, no.” Nat looked around the room twice, then his gaze landed on Jonathan LaForce sitting next to me. “Jonathan Dayton LaForce, how many of you—How many of *us* are there?”

Jonathan was frowning. I expected an explosion. He wasn’t the sort of man who take kindly to being yelled at. But he frowned harder, then sighed. “I don’t know,” he said. “In hard numbers. You see, the…Doctor Dufort has been making people, and his father before him, and enhancing people, many of whom could have children, and we don’t know how many of them there are. But as far back as it goes, the Duforts were secret Usaians, and as we came of age, at least those of us he thought receptive after trying to talk to us about it, were initiated into the faith and given our piece of flag.” He hesitated. “I have my piece of flag,” he said, and reached into his suit, and brought out a small, rectangular box, flat and shiny, which he laid on the table with a thump. It was echoed by an equal thump from Brisbois, and another from Basil, and another, after a second, from a furiously blushing Mailys.

I didn’t know what the boxes meant, except I assumed they contained pieces of the sacred flag of the Usaians, the barred, star-spangled piece of cloth that was said to have once flown over their long-lost homeland.

But they meant something for Nat all right. His eyes widened and he grew considerably paler. The words “It just became real for him” crossed my mind, but even I wasn’t sure, precisely, what they meant.

He stood and inclined his head, and put his fingers up, pinching each side of the bridge of his nose, as though trying to calm thoughts going

through his head in tumult. I got the impression that if he'd spoken then, if he'd spoken immediately, we'd have gotten shouted at.

Instead, he took a deep, long, audible breath. He said something under his breath. It wasn't *merde*. Or at least it didn't sound like *merde,* but I think it meant the same.

Then he looked up, though his hand remained poised for his head to drop into it at any minute. "We have a problem," he said. "And that is why I came ahead to try to find a solution to it, before the Good Men are upon us, and before our problem is effectively without solution.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, what precisely do you expect the army of Olympus, arguably a Usaian army, which is why I'm here at all, to do for you?"

There was a long silence, and then Mailys spoke, her voice thin and that of a very little girl. "Fight for us."

Nat looked at her, and nodded once, but I had the impression the movement of his head was in no way an agreement with what she'd said. "Granted," he said, "I and my comrades will fight, bleed and die for fellow Usaians, and for the cause of liberty around the world. But you don't understand my meaning. General Herrera of the Olympus forces is engaged in battle right now. We have been engaged in battle, or in preparation for battle, or in various conflagrations against the armies of the Good Men for over a year." He let his hand fall, and faced us fully. "We've done bleeding and dying enough, but if you think we are enough to stop the Good Men taking over this seacity or overrunning it, or even bombing it from above till it's a cracked shell on the floor of the ocean—" These words elicited a small sound of protest from Simon, which in turn got him a cold look from Nat's dark eyes. "You are out of your ever-loving minds. I learned in religious education that the heart of a pure Usaian, infused with the faith and the words of the Founders, was capable of defeating ten of the Good Men's slave troops. Even if that were true—and I'll tell you right now I've seen no superiority of that kind, our hearts stop like others when we're shot—this still leaves a good two troops of the Good Men for each we kill or more. They have millions they can draft.

"We've managed to survive by running what is largely a terror action; by hiding and striking from cover, by running a guerilla war against the Good Men and their transports, their goods and their facilities. And we've become painful enough for them not to try too hard to kill us; for them to

avoid us and try not to disturb us. We haven't become painful enough for them to engage in all-out war against us. We have five seacities with us, and the only significant territorial areas are those of Olympus, and they are, as far as the Good Men know, backwoods, inhabited by ignorant farmers whom they could wipe out anytime. In fact, they've carried out a couple of punitive raids on our towns, which were a minor effort to us but which—" He swallowed. "I was on the receiving end of one of those and let me tell you, it might have been child's play to them, but it almost ended the Olympus army, early on."

"You're saying that there is no hope," Jonathan said. "And that we should surrender now? Then why do you fight? Why do you wear that uniform, if all you do is just play at being soldiers, while the Good Men ignore you, save for random slaps at your inadequate forces?"

"I didn't say we had no hope," Nat said. He put both hands on the table and leaned forward slightly, looking at each of us in turn. I noticed the men who'd come in with him were paying close attention. Surely they'd heard this before?

"I didn't say that we could do nothing, as Usaians in the long game. No, no, no. We have hope and we will win this, but it won't be a sudden action, a short, thrusting invasion, a happy moment when the people of the world will realize they prefer liberty and hew to our cause. That's not how real life works, though it makes for a beautiful picture in the sensies." His lips quirked. "Those of you who are fighting men know that. And you know it's a matter of years."

"We don't have years," Alexis Brisbois said. I'd never heard a human being sound as cold, as desolate. "That was my idea when I established this secret center and others like it. The idea that we could lie low and over ten years or so work, return the Good Man to power, and then start again to freedom, another way, but the problem we have is twofold. First, the Good Man has been outed as an artifact, a Mule, and suspicions of course fell on a lot of us who work for him. And second, the Good Men are attacking. I don't know if they intend to use all their forces. I doubt it. But the numbers we got are more than enough to destroy us. Yes, we could still stay, those of us in the Good Men forces who are in these centers. We could stay quietly behind, let the Good Men repopulate the isle, and then set about converting the new population." He pursed his lips. "In fifty years or so, we would have a perfect opportunity. Maybe a hundred."

Nat cackled. “I like your sense of humor, Brisbois. You are funny.”

“Not funny at all,” Jonathan said. “My friends are out there, and my family.”

“I’d gathered,” Nat said drily. “Which is why I’m not taking Brisbois seriously. But let me tell you this, it would be better if we had a finite number, a carefully delineated population. Because I don’t know how to save the population of the island. I understood you’ve gotten those more closely connected with the Good Man’s household into some sort of shelter?”

Jonathan sighed and shrugged. “Most of them, but I doubt all. And besides, pardon me, sir,” the “sir” was military courtesy, as he’d looked at the insignia on Nat’s chest. “I know that you’re here because the Olympus army is sworn to defend Usaians.”

There was a waggle of the hand from Nat. “‘Sworn’ and ‘defend’ are both debatable. We try to protect Usaians when it doesn’t put our cause in danger. But I’d hoped very much we could do a lift of people endangered, that you were in the tens at most. And if you aren’t, I’m hoping most of you, the vast majority of you, can be put somewhere safe. Then we can let the Good Men overrun the island. Because that would be the best thing we could do. We could then lead a small and targeted operation to get our people out of here, and let everyone go to hell otherwise. Let the Good Men have this hunk of rock and dimatough.”

“No,” it was Brisbois, and he stood up and shouted. “No. Martyrs’ blood, man. There are innocents out there. They’ve been dying and we’ve been unable to defend them, but now—And yes, any number of them, probably a significant number are Usaian. And you propose to just let them die.”

Nat made a sound normally managed by clicking one’s tongue on the roof of one’s mouth. “No. You don’t understand me.” He stood his full height, staring at Brisbois in the eye, even though he was of a much smaller build. “I don’t want to leave these people to die. But you should understand. I know you’ve worked for the Good Man, in the secret service of all places, and you must have learned to make the best of a very bad thing, and you must have learned to live with the decisions that don’t conform to your conscience but that are, nonetheless, the only ones you can take. We can’t lift everyone from the seacity. And we don’t have enough people to defend this place. We just don’t. We can bring our army in—well, a substantial

portion of it—and we are willing. I left orders with my subordinates, and they're probably already embarking.

"Usaians run to the sound of guns, to rescue innocents. This much we know, this much we were taught. But, Alexander Hamilton Brisbois, we have neither the numbers nor the weapons to survive this. We will just die. And while it can be honorable to die for what one believes in—" His lips quirked. "I've lost three siblings to the cause. I beg you to believe they're honored. But that doesn't bring them back. Each of them died saving others. And if we could, even remotely, save all those innocents, I'd be the first to say I'd risk all, and die in the attempt. But it's not. You have not a chance of withstanding the forces marshalling against you. Jonathan showed me the papers you got. It is enough to destroy you and us, twice over. You are, you see, a much greater nuisance than the Usaians. I've killed a Good Man. And we've overturned the regime. But none of us, not one of us, had the unmitigated stupidity to kill the Good Man and broadcast it all over the world, as Rose Parr did."

Brisbois gasped.

"And having done that," Nat said. "I think she expected the Good Men to be afraid of her. Instead of which, even if the Good Man she thought she'd killed is still alive, they will obliterate her and the seacity and everything you stand for. You—" He slapped his palm on the table. "Have." Slap. "No." Slap. "Chance."

"But we can't—" Simon said.

"No, you can't. You can't save yourself," Nat said. "You would achieve the same thing by poisoning your whole population as you would by—" He stopped. He stopped, because Mailys had raised her hand, which made her look very young and exactly like a well-behaved school girl. The look on Nat's face was the purest confusion. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Sir," she said. "I am Mailys—Margaret Catherine Moore Bonheur, sir. I am Monsieur Brisbois'…" She took a deep breath. "Not his daughter, but as close to his daughter as someone can be who was made in a lab." She cast a look at Brisbois as she said this. His face was perfectly impassive, as though he'd not been mentioned. I wondered what she meant by that and suddenly a lot of things fell into place, such as why Brisbois had gone to a lot of trouble to try to keep Mailys safe, even though she was obviously made and raised to fight. "And I don't think he's considering everything possible."

“Everything possible…how?” Brisbois said, closely echoed by Nat.

“Sir…” she said. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. She looked vaguely sick. “I am seventeen. I was made when my father was engaged in revolutionary activities. Not mine…or—When I started being taught about our religion, when I started…When Doctor Dufort told me my special relationship to my…to Monsieur Brisbois, I wanted to learn about him. I researched the death, or at least the severe wounding, of the last Good Man. I understand he died by hands unknown, after years of lingering.” She looked towards Simon and I wondered how much she actually knew about the way the Good Man had died. Then she returned her attention to Nat Remy. “But the first thing he did, when he killed the Good Man, or when he caused the Good Man to…to crash, was to put a bomb, a shaped charge, which blew a wide hole on the side of the Good Man’s flyer at a certain time. This caused the flyer to lose altitude and crash, but not… but would not have made the Good Man unrecognizable, so that…so that it could not be denied.”

Nat Remy’s eyebrows were drawn together and high over his nose. “I don’t have the pleasure—” He started.

“No,” she said. “Hear me out. I know there are no charges strong enough to blow the ships of the Good Men apart. They’re big armored transports, each carrying hundreds of thousands of men, but what I was thinking—” Remy’s eyebrows climbed so much they were at risk of being lost in his hairline. Mailys seemed all too aware of his skepticism and she forged ahead, in a kind of desperate rush, “But I was thinking that there are engine vent ports and things of that kind, and that shaped charges put there would give you a chance to throw poisonous gas-releasing charges inside. You see, sir, it’s what you said about…about poisoning the island. Why not poison them?”

She stopped and looked up at him. He opened his mouth, snapped it shut. Brisbois reached towards Mailys’s hands and patted them, comfortingly, I thought, or perhaps just consolingly.

“I know you’re going to say it’s rubbish,” Simon said. “But I think it will work.”

“I’m not going to say it’s rubbish,” Nat said. “Insufficient for full victory, yes. They will not send troop transports only, though I will grant you most of those they’ll send are troop transports. They will also send flyers and some of those will be bombers.” He looked towards Simon. “Is

there an air raid alarm on this isle, perhaps from the trade wars of Good Men?”

Simon looked surprised, then nodded.

“And can you rally your troops enough to fight those who don’t come in transports? I presume you have ship busters for anti-aerial?”

Simon nodded, though I suspected he had no clue if they had ship busters. Unless he’d informed himself while I’d been otherwise occupied. He very well might have.

“And you can deploy forces in some semblance of order, since they’re sworn to you, personally. And we can help with that. Yes. The transports will take most of the people we’d have to fight, but more importantly, the same technique could remove the amphibious assault vehicles that would shell the island from the sea, to soften it for the attack.” He looked animated. “It’s one chance in a hundred, but I’ve fought in worse odds.” He bit his lower lip, a quick nervous gesture. “The problems I have are twofold. One is you’re going to need a hell of a lot of explosives. And the second is that…The second is that it will be almost a suicide mission. There is a chance we can save those who go out, but I wouldn’t count on more than an off chance. Hell, it’s an off chance for us to win this battle at all. But it’s even more of an off chance for us to win the battle and for none of our saboteurs to get shot. How many people can you get willing to go on that sort of mission, one from which they won’t return?”

“I’ll do it,” LaForce said, standing up.

“And I,” Simon said, standing also.

Brisbois sighed. “LaForce, you have young children. I’m sorry, but while every position in this is risky, you cannot be allowed to be foolish. And you, Simon, I thought I’d told you it wasn’t your job to make grand gestures. You’ll be needed here to issue commands, to put heart into the troops, since most of them probably don’t have that pure heart of Usaians that allows them to kill ten of the enemy.”

“But—”

“No buts. You’re needed. Jonathan is needed. Mailys is too young, and by the marginal claim I have as her genetic relative, I’m going to dictate that she can’t do it.” There was a sound from Mailys, but I hadn’t seen any signs that she intended to volunteer. “But I have outlived my usefulness a thousand times over and should have died at least a hundred times over. For

the sake of preserving my miserable life, I took a post that required me to be the enforcer for a tyrant." There was a noise like a tongue-click from Simon. Brisbois didn't even glance at him. "My only hope of being born into the world of freedom to which all good Usaians go when they die, is to die a martyr. Very well, I'm willing to do it. I'm willing to go further. I know where explosives are, in quantity sufficient for this. Shaped charges even."

"A terrorist cache?" Simon asked.

A smile played on Brisbois's lips, though his eyes remained stone hard. "You could say that, Simon. Sometimes your enemies needed to be put out of the way in more…subtle ways."

"Mine?"

"Yes, in the palace. We had experts…Never mind. In the quarters, in the garden. I can lead you to them, but it might be a lively fight," he told Nat.

"Lively fights are what we do," Nat said. "Although it might be a good idea to don dark broomer suits again."

"Rather."

"How…heavy are these? How large?"

Brisbois looked at the men around the table, the men who'd come in with Nat. "Twenty people or so ought to be enough to carry a hundred of the charges. You can easily take five apiece. They are…extendable," he said. "Elastic. But they start in disks about this size," he showed the bottom of his coffee mug. "And they fit in casings of five, carefully shielded so none detonates. Would you?"

Nat nodded. "The forces of Olympus will lend our help to this expedition. Command us as you will. How likely are we to meet with fighting?"

"Highly. The palace is occupied by the forces of Madame, who is doubtless feeling worried her boy-toy didn't return. If her patrols catch us, there will be fighting," he said. "But your men are trained, and hers are merely terrorists. As long as we move fast…"

"Understood," Nat said. "But the problem remains of enough mad broomers ready to risk their lives. We have you, but the heart of a Usaian or not, you won't be enough."

“No, but I volunteer also,” I said, standing up. And to Brisbois’s alarmed look and Simon’s protest, I said, “I too have no children, no natural position in this world, and no duties I cannot avoid by dying. If I die no one will care. The last person to whom I was essential died before I arrived on Earth.”

Simon said something like “Not true,” but I knew Simon now; I had his measure. He was in love with the idea of being in love, romancing the idea of romance. He might think he needed me, but almost anyone else would do—any unattainable woman, the more unattainable the better. It was not, after all, common for the Good Man of Liberte seacity to find women he couldn’t have, by persuasion or by overwhelming wealth. That was all. He needed an unattainable someone who refused him, and I’d fulfilled that purpose.

He didn’t know the main part of my unavailability during the six months I’d spent with him wasn’t even that I wasn’t attracted to him. It had rather been the frozen shock of recovering from Len’s death and the remorse of having failed Len, the fear this would happen again in another relationship.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t have succeeded at another time when I was younger, by the simple expedient of being one like me and sure of himself. But now it had all changed and it was all academic. I wasn’t Simon’s to protect or to stop, and I’d never be.

I ignored his protest and looked at Brisbois. He looked…waxen. But he didn’t tell me I couldn’t do it, nor that I shouldn’t do it. He just nodded once.

“Yes, but two of you—”

“There is also me,” Basil said, standing up. “I rode a broom when I was young, and still do it now and then, even if it is technically illegal. And I can respond for others like me. Twenty or fifty people trained in military discipline, who have close to nothing to live for. People whose parents, or children or wives were caught in the maw of Madame’s uprising. They were guillotining people all day in the square, Monsieur Remy. It leaves a lot of people who will do anything to stop the killing and to protect the innocents who remain innocent.”

Nat inclined his head. “All right,” he said. “If you’re sure that we can muster the people to conduct the raid, this is what I suggest: Monsieur

Brisbois, Madame Sienna, and myself, and my men will go to raid the explosive cache. What I need from the rest of you meanwhile is two things. I need you to work that communicator of yours and get as much intelligence as you can. To carry out this trick on the amphibious vehicles and the troop carriers, we need to hit them as soon as possible. Far enough from the seacity that they don't get one shot off, but close enough that most of them can't turn around, regroup, reorganize.

"And I need you," he told Simon, "to get on a protected channel on that communicator, one that can't be overheard, and order all your secret compounds and all your fighting men to be on the alert and ready to defend the seacity. And yes, the territories too, if you have some people there, though I expect they'll plan to take out the seacity first, so the territories know they're abandoned. At any rate they're more dispersed, and therefore harder to take with a sudden action in one night." He pressed his lips together. "I expect you had training in military, at least for projected trade wars, the same as—the same as any son of a Good Man had, possibly because they believed it would help—Well, for the tone of the thing. Did you?"

Simon smiled, a smile that was almost a sneer and made an anatomically improbable suggestion. "I will take a lot from you," he said. "Because you are here to save me from the consequences of my lack of foresight. Or at least to save my people, which is all I require of you. I will take a lot more from Brisbois who is a friend, and who has gotten me out of scrapes, and into them, for years. But you will not treat me like a child in my own domain. And you will not talk down to me, whether I'm the Good Man or the Protector. Whatever I am, I am the commander of my men and the commander of Liberte, and I hold the fealty of my troops in my hand. You can take your opinions and put them where the sun don't shine. By choice I would go with you on this raid to the explosives depot. And you could use me too, whatever you think. I'm more enhanced than anyone but Zen—"

"That's why I've recruited Madame Sienna."

"But the fact remains that I know I need to be here, and that I need to command and dispose my troops. You can go and carry out your raid in peace, Nat Remy. I will do my duty."

"Good," Nat said, and wheeled around and headed out of the room.

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Astounding

THE AMMUNITIONS AND EXPLOSIVE DEPOT WAS DEEP IN THE GROUNDS OF THE GOOD Man's palace, those same grounds we'd run through, Brisbois and I, back on the night of the disastrous ball.

I didn't know how long ago it was, nor was I willing to calculate. As far as I was concerned, that night, and the nights before it, the months before, most of my life before, belonged to someone else as wholly different from me as though we didn't share anything, certainly not the same body, nothing beyond a few memories.

This time we came back flying.

One thing I'll say for Nat Remy, though he had the devil's own temper, he was a damn able broomer. A damn able leader too. He had obviously trained this group of men, and I started suspecting they were his particular command, his rapid strike force. After all, he'd said that most of their war was a guerrilla operation, and in that kind of war, how invaluable would a broomer squad be, dressed in dark fabrics, striking in the night with neither warning nor alarm? I seemed to remember something about a wave of assassinations of Good Men, and shivered as the image rose before me of a palace window, open, above well-guarded grounds, and a man in black stepping through and—

But then I had to think about where we were and where we were going, and what we were going to do. I was not going to spare any pity for men who for centuries had ruled lands with an iron fist and killed their own offspring to continue ruling.

The building where the ammunitions and explosives were stored was low and large, crouched into an expanse of verdant lawn like a turtle. There were no trees around and that made perfect sense. If it were to blow, the last thing anyone would want was for the trees to catch fire and propagate to the entire grounds.

The lack of trees was somewhat of a problem, as we'd been flying through the trees, a dangerous pastime, but one that kept us relatively safe. Now, about to enter the open space, Nat Remy gestured rapidly to his men.

I'd never learned broomer sign language, a complex system of signaling designed to be understood by boomers in situations of stress. It was said that experienced broomers could carry on entire conversations, and Simon had told me that once someone had done an entire book of poems in broomer language and recorded it. I'd thought it was an amusing idea, and likely a lie, because when Simon was in the mood to tell tall tales, there was nothing you really could believe of the many stupid stories he told.

Now, looking at Nat Remy's hand move and sketch broad gestures, I could believe it. But this left me perfectly in the dark as to what I was to do. Only, as his men signaled back something I could no more interpret than his orders, Remy looked back and lifted his hand in a universal gesture, then pointed at the trees, then gestured again. It was clear. "You two, wait here." I was aware of Brisbois by my side, as I reached to turn the propulsion of the broom off, while leaving the anti-grav on, so I could float in mid-air.

The dark-clad Olympians zoomed forward on brooms that they seemed to move with as much ease as normal people move their arms or their legs.

It seemed to me they were all faster than they should be, and even to my enhanced vision, it was hard to see in the fortunately very dark night as these black-clad figures zoomed forward, encircled the building and landed.

I swear I heard whimpers and sighs, sounds of death in the warm night. I might have imagined it though, as the sounds must have been very small and the distance was great. My memory might even have added those sounds afterwards as, at the time, what I was most afraid of was that the defenders would fire on the attackers with burners.

This didn't happen. Nothing happened, seemingly, save that suddenly Nat Remy was back where he had been, on his broom, as though he'd been spit out by the darkness of the night itself. He was making a different gesture now, waving his hand in the universal signal for "come" and "follow me."

Down where we landed there were men on the grass, dead, I think, or at least unconscious. I didn't look closely, but I suspected dead because Nat Remy would not risk their recovering consciousness and destroying his mission.

“We can’t open the door,” Nat Remy whispered in the kind of soundless whisper that takes years to learn. “And I suspect that it might still be gencoded for you.”

“Likely,” Brisbois whispered back. “And also, once inside, there will be other doors. That’s why I had to come.” I couldn’t see his features, but I got the impression he hesitated. “If you’d stay here and guard.”

“There will be no one inside,” Nat asked.

“Oh, likely there will be people inside, but not as many,” Brisbois said. “And that’s why I’m taking Madame Sienna with me. The important thing though is that Madame might have—almost for sure will have spies, and if they see us go in…”

“I see. It would make a perfect trap. You go then.”

Brisbois and I advanced into a short entrance tunnel. The suspense as to whether or not he’d be able to open the genlock didn’t last long. The door clicked open. A voice from inside, a young, frightened voice said, “Who comes?”

I flicked my burner to cut, and fired into the darkness. There was a whimper, and the man fell. Brisbois turned to me and gave me a half smile. He didn’t say I’d done well not to keep the burner on heat, but I wasn’t stupid, and surely he knew I wouldn’t do anything so crass as use fire near explosives. So his smile might be for another reason, though I had no idea at all why he also shook his head.

Down the hallway, and he shot down another guard before he could hail us. Two more doors were opened by his finger in the genlock.

All too soon, we were in a very long, very low chamber. Even in the dark, I could see row upon row of what by size and shape had to be ship busters, as well as other shapes. I thought there was enough here to outfit an army. Brisbois took a deep breath. And I heard someone breathe behind me. I turned, finger on burner trigger. And recognized the shimmer of Nat Remy’s blond hair, and the general shape of his body.

“Damn you,” I said in a whisper, since I wasn’t sure if there were other chambers, other routes, or if other guards survived. “Why did you follow us?”

He shrugged in the dark. “I’ve been shooting the cams along the way. It occurred to me you probably didn’t have gadgets to detect them.”

“The cameras,” Brisbois said, spinning around. “I’d forgotten all about them.”

“Well, I imagined they’d be here, which is why—”

The explosion came from outside. The walls and floor rocked.

“Who the hell is firing explosives near an ammunitions depot?” Nat roared.

“Ah, that will be Madame Parr,” Brisbois said. He was already running past me, towards the entrance to the depot.

Nat spared me a look as though to ask if the woman could be that stupid.

I said, “I think you missed a camera, Nat Remy. And this is personal. She used to be his wife.”

And then I was running after Brisbois.

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Consider Her Ways

THE GRASS WAS ON FIRE. WHICH WAS WEIRD, BECAUSE IT HAD BEEN QUITE GREEN and lush before. But it was on fire now, burning with an acrid smell, as trails of fire crawled amid the green that looked black like bright snakes glimmering in trails, towards us.

Nat's men were ranged in a circle, and that I saw none of them had been killed. In fact, I thought that Madame wasn't as crazy as she seemed. She'd fired not at the depot itself, but at the space just out of the trees near it. The trails of fire were what remained from what must have been a fragmentation explosive, lethal at close quarters but deployed this far away, more noise than real danger.

The woman, I though, had a flare for the dramatic.

We were all still within the tunnel that led to the door of the depot, in the dark shadows, and she couldn't fire on us without setting off the explosives in the depot.

She had no such protection, except for the fact that we would have trouble taking out all her minions, including the ones doubtless hidden in the trees, and that if we killed her they would shoot back.

She stood now, at the edge of the trees, in her uniform and decorations, flanked by a dozen or so very decorative young men in body-molding uniforms. And by the light of the dispersed fires, I could see she was smiling.

"Brisbois," she called in our direction. "If you surrender, I shall let your friends go."

Brisbois was just ahead of me. He started as if to force his way among the Olympian forces that had ranged themselves in a circle defending the entrance to the depot. The Olympian soldiers closed their ranks against him, so he couldn't have gone between if he'd tried.

Nat had caught up with us. His hand grabbed at Brisbois's arm. "Brisbois, don't be a fool. If she gets you—"

Brisbois shook his arm, to dislodge Nat's hand, and called back, full voice, "And what will you do if I don't, *ma petite*?"

He called her "ma petite" in the same sickening tone that Simon had called me that. At that moment, in those circumstances, it dripped with irony and bitterness. The hair at the back of my neck tried to stand on end.

"If you don't, I'll blow the ammo depot. I have it rigged to blow."

He laughed. "You wouldn't, my dear. For one, I do not believe you had anything like the foresight necessary to have the depot set to blow. All your bright boys and girls have been busy in displays of terror and murder among the populace. For another"—he laughed again—"you wouldn't damage the Patrician's grounds, because you're very hopeful that you'll inherit them and get to live here in full splendor."

She didn't say anything. There was a movement in the dark, as if she'd made some gesture of annoyance.

"So, what will you do if I don't surrender myself, *ma belle*?"

"I'll cut you all down," she said. "You and all with you, including your fancy woman. Don't think I don't know. Don't think I haven't heard."

"Have you?" he said. "Have you heard that Jean Dechausse committed suicide?"

It was clear she didn't even know Dechausse was dead. There was a jump, a startled sort of shock, and then she screamed, "You lie. You captured him. You have him in some way he cannot communicate with me. You—"

"Suicide."

"He wouldn't."

"Suicide through stupidity. He had a chance to get away, but instead he chose to try a desperate gambit in which no man with brains could have hoped to win. He would have lost no matter what he did. I'm disappointed, my dear. Your taste in men used to be better."

"I picked you."

"As I said, your taste was better once." He seemed very calm, almost sad. "But now that Jean Dechausse is dead, who can you trust? Who in your entourage haven't you betrayed? You say you have us surrounded and that

you can bring overwhelming force to bear, but can you? Who will you betray as you betrayed me? And who will betray you?”

She looked very pale in the darkness, pale enough I could see the pallor of her face, her gestures. “I could take you back,” she said. She was speaking too fast. “I loved you once. I could take you back. If you come to me I’ll let your friends go, and I’ll take you back.”

“Take me back to what, my dear? The Good Men are going to attack and they’re bent on destroying you for killing the Good Man.”

“I didn’t—”

“No, but you broadcast killing the surrogate, you poor fool. The world thinks you did and the only way for them to erase what the world thinks it knows is to erase you.”

I was looking, and some of Madame’s entourage peeled off, melted into the trees. I wondered if they were going to warn others, perhaps to order us shot down. Or if they were deserting. If they’d just realized doom was headed for them.

“I will defeat them,” she said. “If you just surrender to me.”

“I trusted you once,” he said.

“You loved me once,” she said. And paused. “How is our daughter?”

I put a hand forward, I grabbed at his arm, opposite Nat Remy. “You can’t surrender,” I said. “We have to fight our way out.”

He shook my hand away. “Very well,” he said. “I shall come out in the open, but you have to dismiss your men first, so that I know you’ll allow my friends to go.”

Rose Parr stomped her foot, or it seemed to me she did so. It wasn’t a very military gesture, but more the way someone would shoo a cat. She stomped her foot, she waved her hand and people melted into the dark, on either side of her, leaving her standing alone.

“Come,” she said. “You see, it’s all safe.”

He elbowed his way past the rank of Olympians. Nat shot me a worried glance. I dove forward and grabbed at his arm. “No, Alexis. It’s a trap.”

“I knew you when you didn’t hide behind a woman,” Rose Parr said.

Alexis Brisbois shook my hand away.

He took a step into the clear space between our group and Madame. Then another.

A barrage of light shot from all sides, as the rays of several burners, from men hidden in the trees, blazed at him.

The burners set the grass aflame again, but Brisbois wasn't there. I don't know if normal eyes could have followed, but I saw him clearly as he rolled, and turned, and fired at Madame Rose Parr. She looked surprised and started to fall, and I had both burners out and was aiming through the trees in the direction the shots had come from, and Nat Remy had joined us. If he wasn't enhanced as we were, he was putting on a good imitation, firing fast and accurately, and taking down one enemy after another.

Until no one fired back.

"It doesn't mean we're safe," Remy said. "There might be others. Almost for sure there will be others."

"It will take them a while to recoup, now that Madame is dead," Brisbois said. "It will take a while for the inevitable ambitious successor to rise up. Her heir apparent was Dechausse and Dechausse is dead."

He spoke calmly enough, and I wondered if he felt nothing for the woman who'd been his wife. But then she'd tried to kill him. I couldn't even imagine what survived of his feelings, after that.

I followed with Nat's men, while Nat kept watch, back into the arms and ammunition room, and this time we turned on the portable lights we'd brought with us. The walls were indeed ranged with weapons, except one wall which was piled high with what looked like gray disks. We took the disks we'd come to collect, but before we left Nat Remy came back in. His eyes shone as he looked at the weapons, and I realized the man had a true love for the machinery of war.

We ended up taking ship busters back too, strapped on our backs, two apiece. Nat Remy said he needed them. I thought it was more a personal thing.

But we made it back to the compound without incident. Which is when the dangerous part began.

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Beyond the Singing Flame

IT STARTED ALMOST CALMLY AND IT WAS THE SORT OF ADVENTURE THAT SIMON would have loved, if he'd been allowed to go with us. There was the flight over the dark sea to the approaching transports. And that's where the danger came.

You see, we were dressed in dark colors, and we were flying so close to the dark water that periodically my boots touched it. This was necessary so any motion, any reflection, would get lost in the motion and reflection of the restless sea waters.

But the ships had sentinels. And the sentinels were neither asleep nor blind. And the ships probably had other methods of detection that I knew nothing about.

Nat Remy, who did know about them said that they would have trouble picking us up close to the water. But it wasn't impossible, he said, just difficult. It was, he said, a matter of staying alive as long as we could. We ended up with fifty men and women and each of us had five charges. Some would use all five, and some might be killed before they set one. The important thing was to immobilize and destroy as many ships as possible.

And there were a lot of them.

The troop transports, immense and dark, looked like towers on the surface of the water, moving across it silently. And the amphibious vehicles were like turtles, low-slung, shining black-blue under the moonlight.

Coming closer.

I understood for the first time what Nat Remy had said when he said that we now had a chance. Just a chance. There would be air support too, and this force was more than anything Simon could command.

We'd left him back at the center, terse and military, giving orders and disposing his troops. The last thing he'd told me was that he was conscious that people would die today for no other reason than their fealty to him.

Perhaps Simon was growing up. Or perhaps he was playing at being grown up.

My mission was to take out the amphibious vehicles. Mine and that of the ten smaller men and women. I didn't know how many were women, because we'd all been wearing the dark suits. And besides, it didn't matter. We were instruments for a mission right now, and what we all were was people who had nothing left to lose but our lives.

I've never believed in an afterlife. No, that is not true. I've never believed or disbelieved in an afterlife. I allow for its existence. Everything is possible. And if there was an afterlife, maybe I'd see Len again. If there was an afterlife, maybe he could see me now, in which case I wasn't about to disappoint him by showing how scared I was as I detached from the group and flew, my legs submerged, to the port that had been shown to me in diagram in the compound.

I found it and put the shaped charge on it, pushed the detonator. It made a small hole, where the dimatough was weak and punctured by tiny vent holes.

The hole was enough. I pushed one of gas bombs in and flew on, so close to the water that I hoped I was invisible. I wondered where Brisbois was and how he was doing. He was too large to try for the amphibians, and only the greater shadow of the troop transports might give him cover, but still he wasn't exactly what I thought of when I thought of subtlety and stealth.

I disabled one amphibian, two, and hoped the gas was working, as we had no way of knowing. The ships would go on under what propulsion they were under. The only difference would be, if our plan worked, all that would land ashore would be a ship full of corpses.

On the fifth ship, I didn't find the vent hole where I expected. It was clear there were two models of ship. And no one had told me about this one. I looked, frantically, feeling along the carapace, trying to find another vent hole, trying to reach for my mechanical intuition to guess where it could be. But there is no engineering reason to put that in a specific place, certainly not in a vehicle I knew nothing about.

I was feeling around when a porthole opened, and someone looked out.

I shoved the shaped charge into the porthole, and probably in the mouth the man had opened to scream. I pressed the detonator by touch, and

then I shoved the poison gas grenade in.

And the world exploded.

Or rather, it looked like the world exploded. Something, somewhere, inside that ship had been highly explosive and my shaped charge set it off.

I found myself hurled backwards through the dark night, into the water, and down, down, down, down, in the cold and the dark.

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The Light from Infinity

I CAME UP THROUGH THE COLD DARK, IN WHAT I HOPED WAS THE DIRECTION OF THE surface. This was difficult because my eyes were playing me tricks. It seemed to me there were shimmering lights from every direction, and I was swimming towards the brighter portion of the dark waters. Which might be a mistake, because hadn't it been dark when I'd been thrown?

We didn't have the oxygen tanks often worn on the brooms. We didn't have them because we weren't going a long distance, and we weren't going to a high altitude. Also, we didn't have them because having an explosive strapped on your back, slowing you down and making you less safe, was no way to accomplish our mission.

My chest hurt. My heart felt as though it would burst and I was cold as hell as I swam through inky black towards a light that might only be in my head.

I surfaced when I'd just decided I was going the wrong way. I gulped oxygen, greedily, twice, before realizing that I smelled smoke, and burning flesh and something that smelled like burning oil, but was probably the inside accoutrements of the amphibious vehicle. No. The amphibious vehicles. There were pieces floating everywhere, as well as what I suspected were pieces of people. None were close to me and I didn't investigate.

There were also fires. Some of the transports, and some of the amphibians, were on fire. Hisses from above caused me to look up, and I saw large, slim flyers zip by overhead. Their purpose became clear as I heard explosions from the seacity. The aerial support.

Which is when I realized I'd lost my broom.

I was adrift, in a cold sea filled with dead men and flotsam, and I had no way to get back to the seacity.

"Zen!"

It was Brisbois. On broomback, flying close. He lowered himself till his legs were in the water. “Can you get on? Are you wounded? Everyone returned but you and you—”

He looked surprised. I had been swimming around to get on the broom, and saw his face freeze in utter shock, before I saw a bloom of blood on his chest, bursting through the fibers of his dark suit.

I remembered a sound which wasn’t quite a sound, a movement. My back brain had decided which of the presumed dead men wasn’t quite dead. My hand drew Brisbois’s burner and fired where I knew the enemy was. His shot aimed at me went wide. I felt it graze by my hood, but the shooter was dead by then.

And so was Brisbois. Or at least I thought so. He’d let go the broom, which had flown on, at water level, lost to us. And he was underwater, plunging down, arms wide.

I grabbed him by the back of the suit, thanking my creators for my enhanced strength. I dragged him and myself towards one of the larger floating pieces of amphibious vehicle. There was no one on it, living or dead. I climbed on and pulled Brisbois onto this makeshift raft. He was almost surely dead. One couldn’t be alive with that kind of wound in the chest.

But some part of me refused to give up, and I found myself breathing into his mouth and pushing on his chest, not even sure that pushing on his chest wouldn’t make it worse. I didn’t have enough light to see if the beam had hit him in the heart or just close to it. I didn’t have enough medical knowledge to bring him back. I didn’t even have the med kit that had proved so useless when Len had gotten radiation poisoning.

I felt the movement beneath my pushing hands. His eyes opened. His hand came up and grabbed mine. “I’m not,” he said, panting a little. “Stopping breathing. Stop that. Though you can kiss me again.”

I blinked at him, and snorted something between relieved laughter and choking. “I wasn’t kissing you.”

He closed his eyes. “They always say that.” The blood pouring from his chest had soaked all the front of his suit. My hands were red and sticky with it. Surely he couldn’t have so much blood in him that he could survive this.

“Alexis,” I said, unwilling to let him go, unwilling to let him slide from me into that great unknown where he might or might not exist, might or might not see me. “Alexis, don’t die.”

He laughed. There was blood at his lips, shining wetly. “Don’t cry, Zen,” he said, softly. “Don’t cry, *ma petite*.” And said like that, it was a completely different endearment from either Simon’s mannered courting or from the same words as he’d spit them at Madame. “I couldn’t bear it if I made you sad. And why should you care for me? Why should you care for Alexis Brisbois?”

“I think you know very well,” I said. And my voice sounded unaccountably angry. “I think you know very well, Monsieur Brisbois, that I have been in love with you since—”

“Since?”

“Since you kissed me in the market that night.”

He blinked at me. It seemed to me as though his eyes were unfocused and dull already. “That long? I thought you didn’t know it.”

“I didn’t. I just realized it. And you?”

“And I?” he said, and laugh-coughed, and blood sprayed out. “I have been in love with you since you were first welcomed by…by Simon. Before you knew…before you saw me.”

It seemed stupid to me. He must have fallen in love with me for my looks, because he knew nothing else of me. But men were stupid and would fall in love with the most stupid things for the most stupid reasons, and Brisbois had a proven history of being stupid about women and love. “You have lousy taste in women.”

“I know,” he said. And he closed his eyes and was so silent, I thought he was dead, but I was afraid of calling him and getting no response, and knowing.

“Take care of him,” he said, in almost a whisper.

“Who?”

“Simon.”

“I’m not marrying him.”

“No. But, take care of him. And Mailys.”

“Is she really your daughter?” I asked, because while he was talking, I thought, it would be hard for him to slip away. I willed someone to come and find us. I looked at Brisbois’s hands to see if he had his com ring, but

he was wearing gloves. I started working off one of the gloves, while he said, “Oh yes. Natural. That was when Rose and I married, though it wasn’t…legal.” A pause, and I managed to get his glove off fully. “She doesn’t know.”

He did have his com ring on and I started twisting it.

“Alexis. Alexis.”

He didn’t answer. I twirled the ring frantically. I yelled “Mayday, Mayday.”

I couldn’t imagine anyone being able to save us now. But I couldn’t let Alexis Brisbois die without trying to save him.

Not because he was my responsibility. He wasn’t. Len had been mine, willingly given. He’d been mine to save, and I’d given him death instead.

But Alexis Brisbois was my equal, a free agent, as fast, as strong, as smart, and as enhanced as I, or close as made no difference. I owed him nothing.

I just couldn’t bear the thought of his dying. I realized it felt like I would lose a piece of myself. Is this what love felt like? What it was supposed to feel like?

“Mayday, mayday,” I screamed into the comring. I realized I was crying as tears dripped on my bloodsoaked hands, leaving little clear imprints. “Mayday, this is Zen Sienna and Alexis Brisbois and we need rescue.”

No one answered. I was floating on a piece of a broken ship, on a cold sea, with a dying man. Above me deadly fast and silent attack flyers zoomed. And to my right, Liberte seacity was going up in flames.

My world was crashing in pieces around me, and nothing mattered but this one man. “Don’t go, Alexis,” I whispered. “Not yet.”

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Misfit

"We shall have a state funeral, of course," Simon said. He was directing the cleanup of his palace, which was indeed charred and half-destroyed between Rose Parr's depredations and the bombardment.

Mephistopheles, Simon's big black tomcat, wound around his legs, behaving as though he'd never disappeared and there had been no upheaval at all around here. Where he'd been during the fighting no one knew, but he showed up slick and well-fed, and acting as though the fuss Simon made over his reappearance were an overreaction.

We had, against all hope, against all reason, won. Not that it was a permanent victory or a cost-free one. Too many people had died in the fight the night before. And the seacity was a mess. Simon's loyal troops were going street by street and house by house, partly to catch any invaders and partly to catch revolutionaries, but mostly to offer help.

And Simon was in the most intact room in his house: the ballroom. He wore an impeccable, and gaudy, silk outfit and he looked strangely happy. Next to him were Royce and Martha Remy and Lucius Keeva.

They'd had a long discussion with Simon on the problems of the situation. Martha and Lucius were, after all, experts in psychological warfare, and they had talked him into not acting the fool for a change.

But he was strangely animated, and said, "But I am allowed one last piece of display, right? Having died a hero, one deserves a great funeral, right? There will be a corpse on display, at least if a corpse can be procured, and we will have corteges and…It's a pity they no longer have a tradition of having games in honor of the dead man, isn't it? I'd like a hecatomb, too, something showy, though I suppose sacrificing a hundred flyers wouldn't be as much display as sacrificing horses, and I like horses. I don't want them killed."

"Simon," I said impatiently.

And Martha, who was more patient than I, said, “You destroyed more than a hundred last week. Have that for a hecatomb.”

Simon pursed his lips. “I suppose,” he said. Then he turned to me, and suddenly the world spun on its tail. I was in the ballroom, now devoid of couples and dancing and music, and Simon St. Cyr, ruler of a vast domain, was about to propose.

If spaceship mechanics had no place in a fairy tale, how much less fighting women with various wounds hastily patched up and barely healed. Unlike others, I’d not rated regen, but I had bled.

I’d bought my citizenship in this world. I’d paid for it in blood. I’d paid for it in tears, in horror and in heartbreak. I’d paid for it in the dark of night, when I’d screamed myself hoarse into a ring that might be giving my position away to the enemy.

I was not going to pay for bed and board, or repay Simon’s admittedly great kindness, with my body nor my life. I’d promised Alexis I’d look after Simon, but I’d also told him I would not marry Simon.

“No,” I said. “Before you ask, the answer is no.”

“But,” Simon opened his hands. “*Enfin*, Zen, you are cruel. Here I am making a great sacrifice, for the good of Liberte seacity, for the good of the world, and you won’t even give me a little palliative to sweeten it up.” His eyes shone with mischief that gave the lie to his plaintive words. I realized with a shock that he was teasing me. No one had ever teased me. Not like that. It felt unexpectedly good. It felt like belonging and having friends.

Most of my life, I hadn’t known who I was. Or rather, I was who my parents told me I was, because I was faster, smarter, stronger and that alone defined me. Even knowing Kit and Athena had given me no one like myself to compare myself to, because Kit was younger than I and Athena was a stranger in our world. But now I’d met many who were as fast, as smart, as strong as myself.

And in finding people like me, I’d found where I was different, where I was myself. I was Zen Sienna and I didn’t have to look outward to define myself. I could be at ease and have friends.

I smiled at Simon, then leaned down and brushed his cheek with my lips. “I appreciate your sacrifice,” I said. “I do. And I shall be a sister to you.”

His eyebrow rose. “A sister?”

“I think Alexis was always your big brother, in a way.”

“Ah. Alexis. Yes. He—”

“Sir.” This was Royce, sounding put out. “Truly we can’t delay. If we’re going to do this properly, I need time. And this is not a job I think we can rush.”

“Ah, no,” Simon said. His eyes glinted with pure enjoyment. “I have to have a quite different face in order to be the war hero to preside over my own funeral.”

Lucius said, “Sorry. I know you wanted to ah…pan for gold, but this truly is the only solution.”

Over the last few hours they’d hammered it together. Simon could not rule as Simon. People knew he was, after all, a Mule. And in a seacity whose culture wanted everyone to be equal and not just equal before the law, there weren’t enough secret Usaians to allow him to continue ruling. But there also weren’t enough Usaians to govern themselves. The scarred, broken, scared city needed a savior.

It is the sad habit of humans in time of extreme stress to look for the mythical man on a white horse, and if we didn’t provide Liberte with one, one would arise.

But Olympus wanted its alliance, and the person who rose must be someone who hadn’t rebelled against Simon, or at least wasn’t known to have done so.

The Good Men would punish that. But if it was someone who had been loyal to Simon there would be no affront to the Good Men, and Liberte, having proven a tough nut to crack, would be allowed to go on, like Olympus was allowed to go on.

And so it had been agreed that like the Mules of old, Simon would take the place of himself and pretend to be a normal, unenhanced human. His features would be altered by Alard. If any of Simon’s alternate bodies remained, a viewing would be contrived, and certainly a grand funeral for the dead Simon St. Cyr.

Simon kissed my hand, turned around and left with Royce Alard and Lucius Keeva, saying, “I still haven’t decided what to call myself. Do you think Joseph Martin is too big a giveaway?”

Martha met my gaze.

“Do you think he’ll ever stop playing the fool?” I asked.

She gave me a wan smile. “He must. I’d feel better though if I knew—If I knew—”

“That he wasn’t one?” I asked.

She smiled again. “More that, that power won’t do to him what it did to his…father. That he won’t grow to like it so much that he will do anything to keep it.”

I did my best to smile back. “He won’t. He is a romantic, you see. He really only is doing this for his people. He wants to go trek the territories and map them anew. He wants to climb tall mountains. He wants to pan for gold.”

“Pan for gold!” she said. And then, “I’m surprised you didn’t accept him.”

“What, and play Josephine to his Napoleon, until we can arrange his exit in a way Liberte will self-govern? Not for me. And besides, I don’t love him. And I’m not free.”

“Brisbois?”

“Last night, a small Usaian ceremony,” I said. “He’s returned to the fold.”

She nodded again. “And you’re going to go right away from it all?”

“To the territories,” I said. “This world has a bewildering space and variety, and I intend to see a lot of it.”

Martha managed a smile. “And Mailys? I understand she’s found out who she truly is and was shocked?”

“She’ll be living with the Duforts. She’s too young for all this. Was always too young to work with Alexis, but Alexis wanted her under his eye, in case her mother tried to convince her or kidnap her. But now she can go live with the Duforts while Corin is in medical training, and learn what it is to be young and looked after.”

“Well, I wish you luck and happiness.”

“Oh, she’ll be happy,” Alexis said from the door. “I’ll make sure of it. I intend this marriage to work.”

He stood in the doorway of the ballroom, looking perfectly incongruous in broomer attire, wearing his backpack and holding mine. I put mine on.

“I hope we’ll see each other again,” Martha said, shaking our hands.

“We will,” Brisbois said. “I promised Simon I’d come back and knock some sense into him if he was overcome by power lust. While I don’t think that’s likely, I don’t trust him not to play the fool and try to have some grand adventure. So I’ll be back. But for now, we’re going to enjoy our freedom for a while.” He turned to me. “Are you ready, *ma petite*?”

I nodded and gave him my hand, and we walked out, across the lawns that were being repaired, past the myriad workmen restoring the palace to a version of paradise.

Our brooms were waiting and the Earth was ours.

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